AN INTELLIGENT PERSON'S GUIDE TO EDUCATION

TONY LITTLE

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

CONTENTS

PREFACE

I wrote this book for parents. I tried to make it a personal and direct account of school education, especially in the adolescent years, drawing on my experience across some 40 years. Response from parents has been lively, reflecting a range of expectations and worries. The common theme, however, has been a collective sense that a good education is a great deal more than academic courses tailored for ease of measurement.

Notable among the responses have been the letters from schoolteachers who have picked up and amplified this refrain. Despite the apparently strange difference of the independent, boarding school world, teachers in state and day schools have found resonance in ideas that are universal and underpin the best school education. These teachers value genuine breadth. They want the opportunity to help young people grow and

blossom as fully-rounded human beings, but too often they write in wistful tones, or even despair, because they have felt constrained from giving their pupils an experience of this quality. Their voice is clear – professional competence, delivery and outcomes are important, but there is a deeper calling that must be nourished and celebrated if we are to do the best for our children. When it comes to our teachers, we need mentors, guides and role models, not skilled mechanics.

A number of correspondents about the book have been current school students. This has been less of a surprise than it would have been just a few years ago. More young people are expressing interest in the process of their own learning and becoming more excited by new possibilities. There is, indeed, a tremendous energy around the 'online space', a new frontier. Some of this interest is the excitement of novelty and many bright, new ideas may turn out to be impractical, but what is striking is the growing awareness of the young about the process of education and their enthusiasm to discuss it.

Herein lies our greatest hope for the future – young people energised about the whole

business of education. As one young correspondent wrote, ‘I have learnt how to think and do, not what to think and do – and I want to help others do the same’.

Tony Little
London, April 2016

Introduction

The writing of this short book was prompted by parents. Whether the motivation was earnest enquiry or politeness, over the years parents of pupils in my schools have asked me to write down ideas they have heard me talk about either in private conversation or in a public forum. As I come to the end of my time as a head, reflection seems natural.

Whether or not they pay fees, parents invest a huge amount of themselves in their children's education. As a parent like any other, I know that a good education is the greatest gift we give our children and we want to do our best by them. Yet often parents feel at one remove, wary in a world at once familiar, yet strangely alien, like rereading a well-known story only to discover the text has changed. This book is for them.

What follows in these pages are thoughts and

experiences from my life as a head. In essence, this book addresses three questions I have regularly been asked. What makes a good school? What have I learnt about teenagers along the way? What does a head actually *do*?

There is little reference in these pages to the great educational thinkers of our age and, I hope, even less use of jargon. This is, for the most part, homespun and personal, reflections from 26 years as a head of three rather different schools, including co-ed and single-sex, day and boarding.

Half of those years as a head have been spent at Eton College. Eton is a school which seems to exercise an unusual fascination in the public mind. Depending on your point of view, it is either a meritocratic centre of excellence or a symbol of values that should be destroyed in the pursuit of equality and social justice. I sometimes meet people who are unaware that Eton is a school with real live teenagers, who are much like teenagers everywhere.

There will be those who will say that the Head Master of Eton College has nothing worthwhile to say about education. They may well be right. Except that all teachers are part of our national

conversation and should have something useful to say.

Inevitably what I think and write is strongly influenced by my experience, so teenage boys and boarding in the independent sector feature prominently in these pages, but part of the privilege of being at Eton is the passport it has given me to visit many schools at home and abroad, schools of apparently radically different style and context. Yet I have always felt at home. Whether in the East End of London or in a country prep school, whether in a tower-block in a Chinese city or a backwater village in Africa, a school is a school. There is a great deal more that brings parents and teachers together than separates.

Running as a kind of leitmotif in this book you will find references to A. C. Benson. Arthur Benson was a prolific writer, intimately connected with the worlds of literature, the church and academe in the high Victorian period. He was also a schoolmaster at Eton. In 1902 he published a short book describing and commentating upon his chosen profession. I find *The Schoolmaster* an extraordinary read, part window on assumptions and ideas now out of

fashion, part repository of enduring wisdom. At the least, reference to his observations more than one hundred years ago serves to highlight attitudes in our own time.

The issues, problems and joys of education are universal.

1

‘What Good are Schools?’

It was a hazy, heady afternoon and I was bored. I was a trainee teacher trundling through a succession of courses of variable quality and facing the prospect of a session with a less than stimulating title, something along the lines of ‘Evaluations of school systems’. The speaker was introduced. His appearance was arresting: a pale face, a penetrating eye and a wizened arm. His opening words were more arresting still: ‘Schools are evil and you who are about to teach in schools will participate in evil.’

As a young trainee teacher I was used to having to fend off barbs from friends, along the

lines that teaching was a dead-end job with no prospects, suitable only for people who could not really do anything else. But to be described as the spawn of the devil was something of a new departure. Our speaker turned out to be a disciple of Ivan Illich, of whom more later, and for the first time he gave me cause to think properly about the institutions we call schools. It is a ready enough assumption to accept what is familiar, but actually, I thought, what good are these places we call schools?

There is a distinct strand in English literature which takes issue with the whole business of schooling, along the lines of Saki: 'Good gracious, you have to educate him first. You can't expect a boy to be vicious until he has been to a good school.' This kind of approach is summed up in Osbert Sitwell's memorable description of his education in *Who's Who*, 'Educ: during the holidays from Eton'. It may be that writers such as these entertain some deep underlying belief that schools cause actual harm, but I doubt it; rather, these are the satirical flourishes of people who have the privilege of a good education and come from educated families. Being dismissive of something that has

come easily to you is a common enough human trait.

By contrast, political and social visionaries tend to see education as the answer to everything. With the full force of Fabian rhetoric H. G. Wells said that 'human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe'. The idea that education is central to the health and development of national public life has become a distinct strand of mainstream politics, whether it is Tony Blair's raising of the banner 'education, education, education' in 1997 as the focus for his premiership, or the heroic rhythms of Michael Gove as Secretary of State, 'We must be uncompromising in our vigilance, we must be unyielding in our resolve. Sweeping reform is spurred by moral imperative …'

It is worth peeling away the rhetoric and satire to pin down what we mean by education. At the risk of being a schoolmaster pedant, it is instructive to look at the etymological root of the word. There appears to be a choice of two familiar-sounding Latin words: *educare* and *educere*. *Educere* means to lead forth troops, preparing them for battle, which brings with it a resonance of drill. *Educare* means to nurture, to

bring up, to tend and support for growth. The latter is the correct derivation but it is interesting that these two ideas have been confused over the centuries. Even today a typical dictionary definition describes 'education' as imparting 'knowledge by formal instruction to a pupil'. In my own mind I have an image based on the archaic English verb 'to educe', meaning 'to lead forth as a river'. The idea that we learn by finding our own way as a river does down to the sea, rather than being channelled and directed, is a powerful one. This is expressed well by Muriel Spark through the words of her eponymous character Miss Jean Brodie, who criticises her colleague Miss Mackay for, 'putting in something that is not there and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion.'

The two descriptions of education prompted by the *educare*/*educere* debate neatly frame the central juxtaposition. Is the education we wish for our young people to be delivered through formal instruction by imparting particular knowledge and developing certain skills, or is it the nurturing of an individual's natural abilities to their limits?

Most of us would say that the education we

want for our children is a balance between the two, but as we glance around the world this is not self-evident. In China, for example, a combination of culture (a Confucian belief in the teacher as sage to whom pupils must and will listen) and logistics (with, typically, 50 students in a classroom) has led to a deep-rooted belief in the power of instruction.

Whichever view one takes there is still an underlying assumption that there is innate worth in an institution that brings young people together in one place for their education. Why should this be so?

Let us return to the man with the withered arm. Quoting from Ivan Illich's *De-schooling Society* published in 1971, he told his audience of teacher students, 'the escalation of the school is as destructive as the escalation of weapons but less visibly so'. That schools are weapons of mass destruction is a robust claim and, as a consequence, perhaps easy to reject. Illich does, however, make some telling points. Whether they are good or bad, Illich would claim that schools of their very nature are divisive because the unit of the school will reflect divisions of class, religion and culture, and setting these

randomly constructed units against each other (for example in a league table) is an absurdity. Schools are also oppressive because they restrict natural desires, ambitions and feelings; they are anti-individual and, in effect, exercises in mass control. In any event, Illich would say, there is something rather patronizing about young people of a certain age being corralled into institutions where they are told what to do and what to think. Schools are mechanistic; their structure of classes, routines and timetabling takes away freedom of development. They offer a paradigm of capitalist society. And the list goes on. In essence, the argument runs, schools are counter-productive: claims that schools produce rounded individuals are bogus; instead, they produce stunted, lop-sided people who are fodder for the machine of society.

Illich has a view of society in which education is available to the individual whenever he or she wants it. If a 40-year-old feels the need to take a maths course, then that is when it should be taken. The barriers of adolescence and school leaving age would no longer apply – no more would education 'be wasted on the young'. It is hard not to be strongly attracted by this ideal of a

life of constant self-development. I share his concern that the nation state tends to engage in top-down control of schools and I share his hope that each individual has the capacity to develop unique attitudes and skills. Indeed, I passionately believe that we have the capacity to shape our own destinies. Where I part company with this optimistic view of society is in the belief that human beings really will seek out education at some stage when they feel like it. This is where schools come in.

At its simplest schools give young people a place at the water's edge. A horse may not choose to drink if it is led to water but it cannot drink at all if the water is not there. Schools are an efficient way to train young people in ways that have come to be seen as essential by society. While encouraging young people to think for themselves is the key to any good education, received wisdom is a useful guide to learning how to use the tools. With the tools in hand, you can learn how to learn.

Schools are also relatively cost-effective ways to help young people engage with the skills and attitudes that will help them navigate adult life. Unromantic as it sounds, one of the great

benefits of negotiating the rhythms of school life is the opposite of the 'mechanistic' criticism. Schools are indeed built around routines of one kind or another, and understanding the value of routines, how they can create time and liberate the individual, is a great lesson for a teenager to learn.

But where schools really come into their own is as communities allowing young people to develop an understanding of diverse relationships, offering them role models outside the home and helping to inculcate the standards and values necessary for social living; in short, learning to be part of the tribe. Crucially, this preparation for the tribe includes learning where the parameters of behaviour lie, learning to accept and value discipline. Society needs individuality, imagination and energy to drive forwards, but just as importantly it needs individuals to exercise restraint. Curbing personal dreams for a greater good is a defining mark of civilization. Schools should be the medium to achieve both aims: schools make sense.

The point of schools: a test for teenagers

When encouraging teenage students to reflect on the point and purpose of their education, I have used the following text taken from Benjamin Franklin's *Remarks concerning the Savages of North America*:

> At the treaty of Lancaster in Pennsylvania, anno 1744, between the government of Virginia and the Six Nations, the commissioners from Virginia acquainted the Indians by a speech, that there was at Williamsburg a College with a fund for educating Indian youth; and if the chiefs of the six Nations would send down half a dozen of their sons to that college, the government would take care that they be well provided for, and instructed in all the learning of the White People. The Indians' spokesman replied: We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those colleges, and that the maintenance of our young men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinced, therefore, that you mean to do us

good by your proposal and we thank you heartily.

But you who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will not therefore take it amiss, if our ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with yours. We have some experience of it; several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors nor counsellors; they were totally good for nothing.

We are however not the less obligated by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it, and to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons; we will take care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.

The value to us of our schools in large measure is determined by our views and prejudices, often deep-rooted. I give my students a set of questions taken from an old International Baccalaureate task and ask them to consider a response from the Native Americans of Benjamin Franklin's account.

- *What are the aims of the school of which you are a part? What through the aims are you expected to know?* In the case of the native Americans an answer might be to become an outstanding huntsman in all weathers.
- *What are the ideals of the school that have determined those aims?* Perhaps a belief in oneness with nature.
- *Where did those ideals come from? On what grounds are they justified?* The ideals might be beyond memory, inherited traditions through stories and song and justified by the cycle of life, as day follows night and death follows life.
- *What conflicts can arise from these ideas?* In an established natural order it may be difficult to make sense of abnormality, an

eclipse of the sun, earthquake or the coming of the white man.

This provides an enjoyable exercise, prompting a great deal of discussion usually characterized by students' sense of high moral purpose about education coupled with scepticism about adult role models in the public eye. They tend to be light on history (where our ideals have come from) and long on debates about conflict. But it makes them think.

Reflecting on personal and communal experience and analysing the purpose of education are essential ways for students to come to a better understanding of themselves and their connection to society.

In Britain, sadly, there is no obligation for schools to engage their students in this process. Good schools do so intuitively.

2

The Shrinking Curriculum

In place of educational vision, we tinker with the system. This is a sorry truth about British education.

Between the Butler Act of 1944 – which heralded grammar, technical and secondary modern schools – and the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, there was relatively little legislation in education, notwithstanding the introduction of comprehensive schools. Since 1988 there has been almost one major piece of legislation each year. Each new act has represented the temporary victory of a point of view, not a national consensus. There has been

a loss of confidence and shared belief in the function and purpose of schools. For example, should funding of state schools be centralized or local? Are issues of admissions or exclusions to do with the rights of the individual or the common good? More importantly, should the emphasis of school education be to produce effective competitors in a global market place or free-thinkers with a rich spiritual life? Is education a means to an end or a thing in itself?

In a characteristically British way, over the centuries there has been a largely unwritten consensus about the fundamental values and underlying aims of schooling which, broadly speaking, might be described as the development of character, conscience and clean living, with intellectual precision for those who could cope with it. In more recent times this consensus has been more difficult to achieve as fixed points in our social landscape have shifted or disappeared.

In place of consensus, successive generations of politicians have retreated behind a wall of statistics. Their shared message seems to be: if in doubt, measure the things that can be measured, ignore those that cannot, but

depending on the method used; how statistics can be used to prop up an argument or a cause. Adults need reminding, too. As a professional well versed in the capacity of statistics to mislead, I still find my eye drawn to a league table position. And mislead they certainly do. A comparative table can be distorted by changing the rubric; so, for example, the international version of GCSE is excluded from tables, as a consequence of which some of the top-performing schools in the country are rated as scoring 0 per cent.

The problem with statistical tables is not so much their utility as the undue significance placed upon them. They offer a helpful guide to some aspects of performance, but they do not come close to revealing the full picture. A school appears to hover around the top of an A Level table, but what does the table tell you about the school's admissions process or the hurdles it places in front of its pupils even to enter the sixth form? League tables say as much about intake as outcome.

It is understood that raw statistics can mislead, so various 'value added' measures have been introduced, but many parents find them hard to

fathom. In order to appreciate the context of each child's performance, a matrix of information is needed, and even then it is easy to pick holes in the method. It is a convoluted business and it is understandable that a simple record of exam results, presented in football league fashion, attracts the most interest.

The pressure on schools from league tables should not be underestimated, however. Small shifts of percentage point can loom large in teachers' minds. It does not take much of a downward change in a year's results for the school to be described as 'plummeting' in the local press, with an adverse effect on admissions. In this climate it can be no surprise that schools sometimes adapt the programme they offer children. Some schools have identified easier subjects or exam routes that offer multiple GCSE grades for one subject. At primary level, fear of published tables has led some schools to concentrate mainly on maths and 'literacy' for SATS tests, with all the work in history, geography and science for the year recorded in the same, slender exercise book. It has led to a narrowing of experience for children; the curriculum has shrunk.

This narrowing of focus has also been seen in subject syllabuses. A low point some years ago was reducing the content of the science syllabus at GCSE and expressing scientific concepts in the form of stories, thereby 'contextualizing' scientific understanding. The effect of this was to rip out a sense of the grammar and the vocabulary of science. Just as with languages, so too there is a grammar and a vocabulary to be learnt in science or mathematics or the humanities. There are no short cuts to intellectual development, and the academic attainment that comes with it comes from hard work, from addressing matters one initially does not understand, from perseverance and commitment.

The real problem with measurement culture, however, has been the increasing dependency of the pupil on the teacher. This is clear to see. Exam grades are promoted as the most significant part of a child's schooling, so it should be no surprise that pupils and teachers, both concerned about the next step on the measurement ladder, focus squarely on the exam syllabus to the detriment of almost anything else. Yet common sense, as well as

current research in the learning sciences, suggests that the ultimate success of a school career is when pupils are weaned off instruction and can work things out for themselves.

We have more public examinations for teenagers than anywhere else in Western Europe. Over the past 20 years British teachers have become ever more efficient at enabling school pupils to jump through very specific, rather narrow hoops. The scope for creative inspiration and divergent thinking is now extremely limited. A while ago an outstanding sixth-form historian at Eton was bemused to discover that one of his six otherwise top-scoring modules at A Level had been graded U – off the scale, a bad fail. We discovered that he had seen a flaw in the setting of a question and turned it inside out in an essay deemed 'brilliant' and 'degree-level' by two Oxbridge dons, but his answer did not fit the template of the mark scheme and the unclassified grade stood. There was a price to pay: the boy dropped a grade at A Level and lost his university place.

He was a victim of the atomizing of education that has characterized the last couple of decades. With a diminishing belief in an

overarching purpose we have tended to identify the constituent parts of the curriculum that can be held up to the light and assessed.

In so doing, we have created a straitjacket. The message we have given our children is that assessments and exams are no longer milestones on a journey, but the sole purpose and destination. Routinely I hear children in school use the word ‘education’ to mean exams, as in, ‘I don’t want music/sport/social service to get in the way of my education.’ We have impoverished our own children.

The recently announced move towards two-year A Level courses offers a welcome reduction in the volume of examining. However, it remains the case that teenagers apply to university and are offered places before the results of their A Levels, Pre-U or IB are even known. The pressure becomes intense. Aspirational sixteen-year-olds know that they must achieve a raft of top grades at GCSE even to be considered for competitive courses. To a degree unimaginable a generation ago, we have decided to prejudice the chances of late developers, those pupils who sit on indifferent GCSE grades, but who come alive in the sixth form. Some universities freely

always seek to explain to parents why a particular action is right, and this is frequently understood. But teachers also know that parents are sometimes wrong, even about their own children, and while some of them may see themselves solely as customers in the relationship, teachers have a duty as experienced, professional people to stand up for the school, its values and the child.

How do we change things?

There is no template solution. Indeed, one of the problems we have faced in recent times has been the tendency for pundits and politicians to talk as though it is possible to make sense of education largely in structural terms. The way we learn and connect is nuanced, multi-layered, organic: pouring this expertise into a mould produces a rigid shape, the antithesis of a developing, dynamic lifetime of engagement with new ideas. I want to break a mould, but I am not a vandal – there is need for shape in the way we educate our young but it must be responsive and flexible.

criteria; but to be rated good or outstanding should require a different level of effectiveness and aspiration, embracing not only the curriculum as a whole, but also the vital, intangible aspects that make a school vibrant: its relationships, dynamism and ethos. These require judgements to be made without the crutch of statistics, by inspectors with the knowledge, vision and permission to come out from behind a barrier of formulae and templates.

It would be good, too, if they were enabled to use language that reflects life, rather than officialese. I recall an inspection judgement at one school that referred to the 'tyranny of the school bus', a phrase that exactly captured a major problem for the school (that the after-school, extra-curricular programme did not happen) but which was deemed an inappropriate phrase and removed from the report.

Although it is a mighty challenge for any inspection regime to report confidently on matters not rooted in hard facts, and while there would be a minefield of problems to negotiate, we must find a voice for holistic education and let it sing.

One of the ironies of the situation is that

educators overseas view this British tradition as something to be strived for, or at least interpreted into another culture in order to release its benefits. The top-performing OECD area in PISA assessments, under most headings, is Shanghai. Yet it was in Shanghai, in conversation with heads of the leading schools in the area, that head teachers' concern and frustration about the failings of Chinese education became apparent to me. They know their students produce unsurpassed results in examined conditions in what they describe as 'theoretical education' but the system that seems to serve Chinese students so well does not help them develop a range of skills that the Chinese themselves increasingly perceive are essential for a globalized economy: practical application of knowledge, the ability to present clearly and well, flexible thinking and so on. They feel trapped by the restrictions of the Gaocow, the end-of-school national assessment, the equivalent of A Levels. Does this sound familiar? As one of the most distinguished heads in Shanghai put it to me: 'We know we are on a juggernaut heading for the cliff edge, and we want to change direction, but we don't know how.'

behind this disparity is the continuing commitment to an all-round education, with strong support of the individual, that is whole-heartedly embraced by most good independent schools.

As a nation, we will only recapture a traditional strength, and give our young people the confidence to face change and uncertainty, if we loosen the grip of measurement-driven schooling and at the same time assert the demonstrable benefit of a school culture that celebrates academic excellence and the acquisition of skills, but which is firmly grounded in, and shaped by, personal relationships.

What really matters in a school, when you take away the structures and systems and rules that give a necessary shape to communal lives, are the people and the quality of their relationships. I want young men to leave my school who are confident and independent-minded. I want them to feel that they are unique individuals. But the unfettered exercise of individualism is a curse. Edmund Burke knew it when he watched the unfolding of the French Revolution in 1790 and wrote in words that seem remarkably relevant to us today: any society that destroys the fabric of


image
not
available


image
not
available

First published 2015
Paperback edition, 2016

This electronic edition published in 2016 by
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP