Why young people are succeeding on their own terms and what schools can do to avoid being left behind

FORGET SCHOOL

Martin Illingworth

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How then to put the case for greater quality without appearing to compromise 'standards' in such a toxic political climate? That is the task.

Melissa Benn[1]

A wake-up call to teachers and school leaders, strengthening their arm when it comes to fighting for a better curriculum and also challenging them to do what they can to stretch the curriculum to make it relevant. Teachers can make things happen if they have a will, courage and an understanding of what and why to change.

Ian Gilbert[2]

Kids are perceptive. They know when things aren't just fine and dandy.

Roger Daltrey[3]

1 Melissa Benn, *Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 111.
2 Personal correspondence with the author.
3 Roger Daltrey, *My Story: Thanks a Lot Mr Kibblewhite* (London: Blink Publishing, 2018), p. 9.

This book is dedicated to my own grown up children – Adam, Laurie and Amy – and all the beautiful spirits of the young people who have contributed their perspectives on life and energy here.

Also, for Rachel, who made me a room to write in.

Preface

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones.

John Cage[1]

As a society we are still sending children to school. We have decided that this is of value and we make all children go. We talk about education – a broad and vague concept. The children go to school and often are not told why it is of value or what they will get from the process.[2] And what do they get? Five live broadcasts a day disappearing into the ether but recorded on parchment with quill. Schooling does not show our children enough of the beauty of their lives now or the potential of what is to come. This is because, as far as I can see, the children are there to serve the school, not the other way around. The school has to compete with the one down the road for a label that says it is a success. This is based on the unpleasant assumption that we want our kids to do better than their kids[3] – a vile basis upon which to educate them all. This is why exams have come to be all-consuming. The examinations should, in reality, be no more than a

1 John Cage quoted by Richard Kostelanetz in *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd edn (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 221.

2 Most of the young people who I interviewed in the process of researching this book felt that they would have got more from school if it were clearer what they were personally getting from the experience. Few were actively thinking about what was to be gained.

3 During a September INSET day, I once listened to a head teacher celebrating the fact that his school had 'beaten' another school in the town in the GCSE results. This does not seem to me to be in the spirit of wanting all our children to achieve. Exams as an assessment, of course, need some people to fail to justify their existence.

thermometer reading of how things are going with a child's education.

Towering fences supposedly keep the adult world out of the school grounds (which is a huge shame). Perhaps in reality, though, they keep the children in. There is often nowhere to run or to feel the wind on your face at break time, and lunchtimes have been staggered to keep the children apart. The most compliant and middle-class children are on the school council, tinkering with the status quo, whilst the least compliant are flattened in isolation booths.

The task most days is to guess what the teacher wants to hear and then remember it. The teachers just need the children to pass their exams so that they can keep their jobs. The tests examine what they already know and so are of very limited value and the teachers have long since stopped being allowed to write or reinvigorate the curriculum. Children have access to existing knowledge through the phones in their back pockets, but phones are taboo and shunned in school. Most of what is to be remembered turns out to be of no further use. The world has moved on (several times) and schools have been left behind.

Children's suitability for the adult world is decided by the tests that measure the narrowest range of a child's capacities. When children leave school, they have formed lifelong opinions about how clever they are. Most have decided that they are not. Their futures are hugely uncertain, but we continue to tell children that if they work hard and pass their exams then they will get a good job and a happy life.[4]

The government appears to be largely disinterested in schools and schooling. This is part of a wider disinterest in youth at the moment. The ubiquity of the internet means that

4 There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that a degree isn't as valued by employers as it once was. See, as a starting point, Liz Burke, University Degrees 'Irrelevant' to Big Employers, *news.com.au* (29 January 2016). Available at: https://www.news.com.au/finance/work/careers/university-degrees-irrelevant-to-big-employers/news-story/8a0340dd2b8e70e35b8ce3302c8d0cc5.

the government has lost control of information and resorts to an outdated curriculum to assert some kind of control over what citizens are taught to think and know. But the young now have the tools to know better. They need new skills and new ways of thinking. Schools are at a crossroads: respond to the real world of change, challenges and possibilities that face our young, or become irrelevant.

The signs indicating that the young have lost respect for schooling are everywhere. They have learnt the limited value of the curriculum and the associated tests and they are turning their backs on the whole thing. We can't afford to waste their time any longer.

Do you recognise this polemic? Does it ring true with you? Does it make you cross? Let's talk about it.

My purpose here is to get you thinking about the way in which our young people will encounter a whole new set of circumstances as they enter their adult lives and how we might need to change what we offer in schools to help them succeed.

The invention of the printing press created a seismic change in our language and, by extension, in our society. Literacy began to spread and information became more freely available. With greater access to information came new ways of thinking, new ways of being. The limiting factor of this invention, as remains the case with many more recent ones, was the need for physical resources. The printing press required paper. The camera relied on film paper. Sound recordings relied on wax cylinders and vinyl. Now a digital age is upon us and we no longer need physical resources with which to store writing, images and sound – provided we have the increasingly ubiquitous devices which allow us to access them. These things can 'live' in the cloud and be conjured up at any time. The speed of change has accelerated.

The internet and, more specifically, artificial intelligence (AI) are heralding a speed and scope of change of proportions

that we cannot easily fathom. We invented machines that at first extended our ability to be safe and informed. Now those machines are becoming cleverer than those who invented them. How we deal with the issues and concerns that this new technology raises, and how we make use of such advances, will be crucial in how humans prosper going forward. The future is always supposed to be some distant time yet to be, but the future has arrived, and we are not yet prepared for it.

Our education system was built in an era when we needed to spread information. Now we have so much information that we are struggling to know how to deal with it all. We still look to measure student achievement by what the pupil 'knows' and by how much they can retain and remember, but new technology has made this approach to learning virtually redundant.[5] We all have the information at our fingertips. What is important now is that we build an educational system that places less value on declarative knowledge (knowing and retaining information) and more on procedural knowledge (the capacity to make use of that information). At the moment, I think that we are failing to properly educate our young, but we seem to be getting away with it because the young are educating themselves through the new technological opportunities that they have. The young are beginning to ignore the generation that went before them, because that generation has shied away from confronting change head-on. In truth, young people have learnt about the tool of communication known as the internet and have mastered its use without any formal instruction or 'education'. But as constant access to the internet becomes commonplace and fewer and fewer people remember a time when it was not a natural part of living, we need to be alert to its hazards. Much can be achieved online, but much can go wrong. These are exciting but dangerous times and we need to support our children to understand their relationship with the world around them.

5 And this observation is far from new. See, for example, Murray Wardrop, Learning by Heart Is 'Pointless for Google Generation', *The Telegraph* (2 December 2008). Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/primaryeducation/3540852/Learning-by-heart-is-pointless-for-Google-generation.html.

I think one implication of the digital age is that, in thirty or so years, there may well be no physical schools. We will have stopped gathering children of a similar age together to feed them a one-size-fits-all curriculum, regardless of who they are, where they live and their interests. How we measure a child's capacities will also need to change. Examinations are no longer fit for function: we need a new way to support people on their lifelong learning journeys.[6] Just as we no longer rely on physical copies of texts, images and sounds, I suspect we no longer need physical schools. If you think this is crazy talk, consider whether you think that the system we have now will be appropriate in the coming age of automation, artificial intelligence, Blockchain, and virtual and augmented realities.

For those young people who are aspirant and confident enough to take opportunities that present themselves, there are an abundance to be grasped. The expectations of the young are broad: they are the most informed and well-travelled generation ever.[7] Whilst we must acknowledge that the playing field is far from level (something which we'll discuss at numerous points), I believe that the statement 'most informed and well-travelled generation ever' is true for the young at every economic level. Their access to information and resources is unprecedented, and fairly democratic. This changes what young people expect of life. Each generation watches the next changing and adapting according to how they want to live – and my interviewees' generation is moving away from the last (mine) at the most accelerated rate ever seen. The young receive information, ideas and perspectives in all sorts of new forms, most notably, of course, through the

6 Toby Baker and Laurie Smith, The Beginning of the End of Exams, *Nesta* (3 December 2018). Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/feature/ten-predictions-2019/beginning-end-exams/.

7 Millennials travel more than any other age group and the amount of travelling that they do is increasing. See *The Blue Swan Daily*, Targeting UK Millennials? New Insight Shows They Will Take and Spend More on Leisure Trips During 2019 in Spite of the Clouds Over Brexit (20 March 2019). Available at: https://blueswandaily.com/targeting-uk-millennials-new-insight-shows-they-will-take-and-spend-more-on-leisure-trips-during-2019-in-spite-of-the-clouds-over-brexit/.

internet. This has reshaped how they see themselves and their potential place in the world.

Melissa Benn's eloquent and well-informed *Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service* documents the government's failure to deliver an education system that is fit for purpose.[8] Governments' and schools' attempts to be the fonts and gatekeepers of knowledge are over. Schools need to look again at their offer. The young need to network, they need to communicate effectively over digital mediums,[9] they need to manage money and they need to be alert to the world around them. There are new pressures on their mental stability, pressures that diminish the joy of childhood and the sense of readiness – when the time comes – to be a mindful individual and a responsible and caring citizen. If the system does not respond quickly then the young will no longer see any relevance to their schooling. This dissatisfaction is already growing.

Children go to school because they have to. The adult generation has agreed that this is what happens. There follows an assumption that what children receive – their education – is worth having. In listening to my successful young interviewees talking about their lives and their businesses, I am increasingly persuaded that we can no longer assume that the current 'education' on offer in our schools is the best that we can provide. Not even close. One young person who I interviewed as part of my research, a barber, said:

> 'When I left school, I had no idea how much money I needed to make a decent living … but I knew that plants need sunshine and water to grow.'

8 Benn, *Life Lessons*.

9 Jacob Snelson, The Digital Necessity, *Medium* (4 August 2017). Available at: https://medium.com/digital-society/the-necessity-of-technology-85462f953910.

Think of this. What if going to school were optional? What do you imagine the take-up would be? For those children who choose not to come along, what do you imagine they would give as reasons for non-attendance? Do you think that they would say that they don't want to learn or that they don't want to learn in the way in which school chooses to offer learning? What do you think they would see as relevant and useful to their lives now and in the future? And for those who would still attend, what would they say is useful?

Schools have been left behind because they are operating with a crowd-control mentality. Investment in schools has focused on providing new buildings and on controlling how children conduct themselves in them. Do up your tie, wear your blazer unless you are told you can take it off, stand in line, be in a house system: these things are ephemeral side issues – the structural devices of a school. Little proper attention has been paid to what is taught and its value to the child in school today or to the citizen they will be tomorrow. The way in which our society operates and the values that it hopes to share have changed and are in a cycle of constant further change. What do we tell the children? This is the most important question of them all.

The internet means that access to information has become hugely democratic and knowledge has been taken out of the control of governments and their purveyors of culture: schools. Children can now learn as they choose. They are able to make choices about what and when to learn. They tend to choose on a need-to-know basis and want to learn right here, right now. They like to multi-source, preferring sound and image over print. This is not the model prevalent in schools. There is a growing tension between the ways in which schools teach and the ways in which children want to learn. Alongside this, schools have become a much smaller part of the ecosystem of a child's potential learning. The school curriculum has to compete with wider opportunities to find things out. Unfortunately for teachers, this throws light on the out-of-date curriculum that they are being asked to

deliver.[10] When we decry the death of reading ('Kids never read these days', which, by the way, is nonsense. They read loads more than they did when I was at school. Try taking their phones off them and see just how badly they want to read – the issue is that we are reluctant to class consuming messages and online content as 'reading'). What we are really talking about is the downturn in reading – at length – of novels and non-fiction texts. But that old-fashioned means of story-making is now competing with *Fortnite*, and with Facebook, and with *FIFA*, and with films, and with FaceTiming your friends. There are so many choices, so why choose the one that the previous generation is insisting upon?

The dominant model of school education is that of passive, non-participatory reception of old knowledge that is to be remembered and then demonstrated in a test of memory. That is not how the young choose to learn in their own time and it is not how society at large operates. The curriculum is lagging behind culture. Schools become both symptom and cause of low aspiration, of downward pressure on children, causing unhappiness and spreading dis-ease. Children are offered a diet of knowledge retention, remembering facts that go largely unexplained in terms of why they are being learnt or what their use will be.

In choosing to write about what I see as the real crisis in education, I am seeking to support the work of teachers. Teachers remain the only real stable resource in the classroom and their work is as vital as ever. I have been a schoolteacher and educator for a long time and I am frustrated by the ways in which educating children is constantly being taken out of our hands. I am an insider who thinks that we all need a wake-up call and that those best placed to deliver it are our children. We need to listen to what they are telling us about the schooling they have received. Look at the way in which, in recent years, schoolchildren have ignored their teachers and

10 Victoria Fenwick, Are We Creating a Generation of Forrest Gumps?, *TES* (2 August 2019). Available at: https://www.tes.com/news/are-we-creating-generation-forrest-gumps.

protested on our streets about climate change.[11] They see more value in a day spent finding their individual and collective voices on the streets than in a day spent in the classroom. I think that many would agree with them.

If things are not right and you stay quiet, then they will never change. Change in our school curriculum will only occur when we insist upon it. Otherwise, our power to insist may very well be taken away because children will no longer afford us the authority to talk to them.

We (by which I mean teachers, leaders, educationalists, etc.) can debate (a generous description of some exchanges) with each other on Twitter and other such forums. Ultimately though, our children will take their education off somewhere safer. If you can't see the sense in the argument I'm putting forward, or you think I am plainly wrong, then at least reading this book will give you the chance to think about what you want for your children's futures. It's okay for you to disagree, but please listen to the young people whose voices fill these pages. They are full of life, full of energy (sometimes a different energy to the one that we require in our classrooms) and I think that they need our help. They need advocates and we are well placed to be those people.

> … don't rely on the adults too much. Most of them mean well, but they just don't understand the world.
>
> Yuval Noah Harari[12]

The questions being asked, and the issues being addressed, in education today are just too small. In-fights over funding, over types of schools, over local and national control, and

11 Patrick Knox, Youth Climate March: Thousands of Student Climate Change Protesters Descend on Central London in Record-Breaking Turnout, *The Sun* (24 May 2019). Available at: https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/9145737/fridays-for-future-climate-change-protesters-110-countries/.

12 Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018), p. 266.

over exam content fail to see the future coming. We need to be pursuing the answers to much bigger questions, such as:

- What should the functions of the curriculum be in the 21st century?
- What subjects/topics (that are not on the syllabus) would young people like to study?
- Are there subjects that we should add to the school curriculum that are not currently taught?
- What skills and proficiencies does society actually need the young to have right now?
- Where are the lines to be drawn between essential and specialised knowledge? For instance (and to start an argument!), to what age (if at all) should you be taught science as a compulsory subject?
- In what ways do we actually use our ability to read today? Does this have an implication for how reading and text is approached in schools?
- What is important and relevant in each subject? What do children need to know in fifteen years' time when they are the new adult population taking our society forward?
- How can we broaden and diversify the curriculum so that everyone feels that the education they receive is about them? (Edexcel have made a start on this with their additions to reading lists for GCSE English.)
- How should we record a child's journey through education?
- It is clear that we need to replace exams, but how do we best 'measure' children's developing capacities?
- How are we going to approach AI and electronic devices so that we get the best possible use from them?
- It's potentially difficult to do, but how are we going to promote confidence and well-being in our school curriculum?

- If there is no level playing field, how will we support those who are disadvantaged?
- In what ways will your pupils be 'richer' when they leave your school? You could ask yourself this question after every lesson if you want a good guide as to whether it was worth doing or not.
- There is a good deal of new research into the brain and, more specifically, into how we learn. How will we train teachers to have a working knowledge of the latest neuroscientific thinking?

Consider where you are as a teacher – and where your department or key stage and school are – in relation to answering some of these questions. The questions around curriculum are big but they need addressing right now. The nature of the help that our young need in understanding who they are and in thinking about the life they want for themselves now and in the future has changed. Children's 'poor' behaviour is symptomatic of the fact that schools are becoming redundant in the learning that they offer – and bickering over other purported causes won't solve the issue. Children's 'poor' behaviour is fundamentally telling us that these children are uncomfortable with the curriculum that they are being offered, not because it is unfamiliar and difficult and they are scared of it – as some would have us believe – but because it is clear that it does not match their needs. Not anymore. We must do something about it.

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VOICES

an explanation

'My advice? Forget school. No really, forget it. I've learnt so much since I left and forgotten most of what I learnt then …'

I spent much of the year and a half that led up to me writing this book interviewing young people who I consider to be 'successful'. In writing up my findings, I hope to investigate the ways in which the young are making a future for themselves despite the, sometimes, poor preparation that schooling is offering them. The perspectives and arguments outlined in these pages are theirs. I have chosen to write about the most significant and high-frequency concerns and hopes that they expressed. In doing this, I hope that I have given them a voice that we can listen to and so that we can begin to address the issue of providing an education worthy of the name. How to provide an education worth having is a subject that we are going to have to keep returning to time and again in the coming years. Our world changes so fast. The way in which we educate our children must keep pace.

This book will in part consider how the young measure their own success. It is the young themselves that I think offer us hope. Despite the hurdles in their way, young people continue to thrive, continue to be hopeful and continue to try to make sense where none seems to be. We need to reward their energy and optimism with an education of hope.

> Since we have to live with uncertainty, only those who are certain (should) leave the room before the discussion can become adult.
>
> Christopher Hitchens[1]

Throughout the book I use the expression 'the young' as a collective term for my interviewees and their contemporaries. These young people are all aged between 20 and 30. They come from many walks of life and different social classes, and are finding their ways across various different employment sectors. They work in the fields of accountancy, acting, architecture, aviation, banking, building trades, caregiving, catering, charity, fashion, film, graphic design, hairdressing, law, medicine, music, personal training, photography, product design, retail, tailoring, theatre and wedding design. Some of the interviews lasted well over an hour; others were more fleeting.

All of these young people are working for themselves or are in the process of moving from paid employment to self-employment. Being in paid positions working for someone else is not their main career aspiration. Estimates for August to October 2019 suggest that there were a record 4.96 million self-employed people in the UK, which represents a rise of 182,000 from the previous year.[2] That might be because the alternative is a zero-hours contract or a job that means they are living on the breadline, or it might be because they have found the courage and desire to 'make it' on their own. Surely one of the core functions of our schools must be to support young people to have the presence of mind to rise to the challenge of the 21st-century marketplace in a post-truth

1 Quoted in Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, *The Four Horsemen: The Discussion that Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (London: Bantam Press, 2019), p. 77.

2 Office for National Statistics, Employment in the UK: December 2019 [statistical bulletin] (17 December 2019). Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/employmentintheuk/december2019.

world with a sense of their own capacity and know-how. We live in uncertain times. Our young people will face many challenges in their adult lives. Schooling must be, in part, a preparation for this. We must also support them to deal with the fact that society is going to keep reinventing itself as the possibilities change over and over again. The world is becoming both bigger (we can travel further, faster and cheaper than ever before) and smaller (we are connected with people all around the world) at the same time. The world is becoming more intimate, and with this new connectedness comes a rising sense of expectation about what is possible. The young have a very different set of expectations of 'normal' to the previous generation.

And what a refreshing experience it is to talk to young people who are so driven and motivated to make a life that suits and sustains them. I asked all kinds of questions (a list of the most frequent ones follows), but at its core the interview that I conducted sought their views on how they had built their success and on the ways in which their schooling was useful – and, of course, the ways in which it had been a hindrance. In the following pages I offer you the voices of these young people and also the patterns of answers that I have been able to discern, which throw light on what sort of an education they could have done with and what might suit those children who are in school now. In tone, the general range of perceptions ran from those for whom school was fine (if a little dull) to those who remain in recovery.

The voice of this text is my own, but it seeks to amplify a further voice: a composite of the voices of the young people who I interviewed. It is my summing up of the patterns and ideas that were prevalent in the responses that I was offered, which I hope honestly and accurately reflects their feelings and aspirations. These young people are individuals but quite a lot of the time they spoke with one voice and, as time went on, I kept hearing recurring concerns and repeated thoughts about their lives and their education. These themes have been distilled into the chapters that follow.

> ‘School did not give me an honest account of just how big knowledge is … how unknowable and how illusive … and it didn’t help me find things out.’

Interspersed into the text are direct quotes from individual interviewees. Sometimes when people are talking to you, certain ideas and phrases stand out in capturing the essence of what is being said.

> ‘When I think about all the questions I answered in my GCSE exams – across all the subjects (laughs) … it’s a right ragbag bunch of silliness.’

Voices are important. Having a voice is important. Being allowed a platform from which to speak, to a forum who will listen, is important. Being listened to is one of those things that promotes self-esteem and confidence. Our instinct is perhaps to listen to the voices of experience and to consult the voices of the past: our elders and our betters. People with power are also influential. Increasingly though, the young are talking amongst themselves. Our young can more easily communicate between themselves, as the internet has allowed access to a vast pool of potential connections.

Paul Dolan suggests that we listen to some people more than others.[3] Those who get listened to the most tend to have three things that we look for, whether we do that consciously or subconsciously. Firstly, they can be trusted. Secondly, we see them as experts. (Perhaps the trust grows from the expertise or maybe the expertise develops trust.) Thirdly, we tend to listen to those who are like us. We tend to pay attention to those who might well reflect back what we already know or what we want to believe in. This is why big data has become

3 Paul Dolan, *Happiness by Design: Finding Pleasure and Purpose in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 2014).

such an important tool for those trying to persuade us to buy or to agree. We trust and believe in those people who are like us. Big data can tell what your beliefs are and reflect them back to you for a whole range of purposes: swaying the way you vote and making you buy things would be two good examples.

But who is listening to the voices of the young these days? As the lights fell on the main stage of Barn on the Farm in 2017, and the festivalgoers trooped off to their tents, the air rang from the whole festival ground with the strains of 'Oh, Jeremy Corbyn'. Something important was stirring in Great Britain, born of the frustrations of the young who were being excluded from joining the mainstream of adult life because they couldn't get a mortgage or more than a zero-hours contract, and austerity was biting them at every turn.

In December 2019, the Conservative government won the general election with a strong majority. However, the polls show that if just the 18–24 age group was voting then the outcome would have been very different. Labour polled 56% of the vote with this age group whilst the Tories achieved just 21%.[4] This is stark confirmation that the generation gap is yawning wide; that the adult world is cold to our young. Clearly, making use of Paul Dolan's list of tendencies, the young do not trust the government, do not see them as capable and certainly don't see themselves belonging to that set of values.

4 See Adam McDonnell and Chris Curtis, How Britain Voted in the 2019 General Election, *YouGov* (17 December 2019). Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/17/how-britain-voted-2019-general-election.

The questions

I conducted all the interviews myself, in all kinds of settings: from university interview rooms to coffee houses and the beer gardens of pubs. Whilst the questions followed a similar format, they also diverted off into conversations and follow-up questions that pursued what I considered to be interesting sidetracks. As a member of one generation exploring the understandings, thoughts and feelings of another, you sometimes have to follow their lead. In fact, most of the time!

I had three overarching questions:

- What was good about school?
- What was bad about school?
- What have you had to learn for yourself?

Then in pursuing recurring patterns of response, I variously asked:

- In what ways was school useful in preparing you for the work you do now?
- Why are you self-employed?
- How creative would you say you are?
- What specifically do you want to achieve?
- How do you measure success?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, where are you now in being a success?
- What is your strongest/main reason for wanting to achieve this success?
- Are there any sacrifices that you are making?
- What knowledge, skills or experiences are supporting you?
- Is there anything that is blocking your way to success?

- Do you think you will always be doing the work that you do now?
- Are there ways in which your industry is changing (and will you have to change)?
- What concerns do you have?
- From where/whom do you normally seek advice?
- Are you politically interested/active?
- Which contemporary issues are important to you?
- Are there any particular ethical decisions that you make in your work?
- Where do you get your work from?
- At what age did you feel like an adult?
- If school were optional, what reasons would you have had to go?
- How do you feel about the exam results that you have achieved?
- What uses have you put your exam results to?
- What skills/attributes/qualifications do you look for in prospective employees?
- What fulfils you/makes you feel alive?

Chapter 1

CONFIDENCE

'In my business, in my line of work, you are always trying to stand out. I think I spent a lot of my time at school trying to blend in.'

A theme that came up time and again in my interviews was that of confidence: the overriding importance of having it and the debilitating effects of lacking it. I have placed it as the first of the themed chapters because it was highlighted by my interviewees as being very important, and the main thing that their schooling had not provided them with. The criticism was usually not about the way that the teachers were with them as pupils. Rather, it was about not having learnt about how to be comfortable in new and challenging situations. This was perhaps the life skill that most felt that they had to learn for themselves after they left school. This is, I think, a real failing of the current school system. We need to look at the skill of being confident and work out how to teach it explicitly. Confidence and self-belief are surely foundational building blocks for success and achievement. We can all recognise the child who sits quietly in the corner during lessons, delivering written work well above curricular expectations but never speaking. What is our responsibility there?

'At school there was always this definiteness about knowledge that turns out to just not be true. Everything always seemed so important and I felt so small … unimportant in comparison.'

Most of the young agree that you don't get opportunities to learn about and develop confidence in school. School is where they learnt things that don't seem to have a lot to do with their lives. Furthermore, it was not really made clear what school had to do with the real world around them. I wonder if we pay enough attention to telling the pupils in our classrooms what the value of them being there might be. What are the skills, knowledge or new perspectives that are being gained in today's lesson and what are the applications of that learning in the real world outside the school gates? Can you answer these questions about your own classroom? If you can, do you spend time making sure that your pupils know the answers too? In listening to them talk about this subject, it seems that the young feel that they came out of school with a lot to learn about what's really going on. The perception is that this lack of 'real' knowledge can seriously knock your confidence when it turns out that you don't really know anything.

How the young perceive their value and their ability to join in successfully with the world around them are significant factors in how their life chances will develop. Being confident means having the strength and courage to make healthy choices, to accept risks and be able to manage setbacks. More and more young people are choosing or having to go out into the world of work on their own. They are entrepreneurial, open for business. As self-employment continues to become a larger and larger part of the job market, young people increasingly have to learn that they have agency and that they can work autonomously. This mindset will come from their own confidence in their abilities. However, it is also reliant on an adult world that sends them positive messages about who and what they are. For instance, the reaction from some quarters about including LGBT topics as part of sex and relationships education is problematic. If we think that children shouldn't learn about homosexuality, for instance, are we saying that it's not okay to be gay? Surely it would be better to let our young people know that non-heterosexuality is not really a thing of any great remark: it's 'normal'. That

SCHOOLS ARE AT A CROSSROADS

Either they respond to the real world of change, challenges and possibilities that face young people, or they become irrelevant.

Young people need to network effectively, manage their finances responsibly, and be digitally proficient and alert to the world around them. If schools do not adapt their provision to nurture these capabilities, then today's youth will increasingly turn to alternative sources to seek out the education they need.

Drawing on the experiences of young self-employed adults, *Forget School* shares key insights into the ways in which education can be recalibrated to better support young people. In doing so Martin Illingworth provides practical suggestions around how schooling culture, curriculum design and pedagogical approaches can be reconfigured in readiness for the emerging shifts and trends in 21st century life and employment.

Essential reading for anyone working in education.

This book is a timely reminder to us not that we should forget school but that we should remember to ask ourselves what it is that young people most need to learn today and where best they can do this, both in school and beyond.

Bill Lucas, co-author of *Educating Ruby: What Our Children Really Need to Learn*

Reading *Forget School* reminds me not only why I became a teacher but why I have continued to love the profession. And 'education' is most definitely only the starting point.

Katy Hodges, SENCO and English teacher

Forget School argues that education for the 21st century must focus on the road ahead of us, and not to teach through the rear-view mirror.

Mick Connell, PGDE English Tutor, School of Education, the University of Sheffield

An English specialist with over twenty years' teaching experience, **Martin Illingworth** is a senior lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University with responsibility for English and drama PGCE. As an Independent Thinking Associate he has delivered keynote speeches and workshops across the UK, and has also worked internationally – undertaking research in Cairo, Egypt, and at the University of Toronto in Canada.

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