

Around the World in

8



Schools



A global journey to discover
what makes a good school

Adam J. Seldon

Praise for *Around the World in 80 Schools*

I enjoyed this book, which I found well-written and highly readable. Adam J. Seldon describes many of the 80 schools he visited around the world – spanning an impressive range of countries, contexts and cultures – in an engaging, reflective and insightful way. He comments on and evaluates what he saw, but the focus is on what he learnt. It brought to mind Nancy Kline's approach of 'Seek first to understand ...' rather than to convince or to persuade. I found especially interesting what Adam had to say about school culture, following his visits to very different schools in countries ranging from South Africa to the USA, and Finland to New Zealand.

As I read the book, it seemed to me that Adam was focusing on telling the stories of these schools and the people in them and allowing us to draw our own conclusions about what education really means – and how it might be more, or less, successful – which could help us to reflect on our own contexts, priorities and evidence of success.

Jill Berry, leadership development consultant

I found this book fascinating. It offers a unique look into schools and schooling in a wide range of different settings through a very personal lens. If you are interested in a thought-provoking dive into educational settings from across the world, warts and all, then this is the book for you!

Andy Buck, founder of Cadogan Press and BASIC Coaching

Personal and professional in equal measure, this is a remarkable book. It could easily have been a travelogue, full of interesting narrative and anecdotes, but it is so much more. It is studded with academic references and illuminating links – and has a powerful structure based around big issues and questions which are all current and relevant, which gives the book real shape and purpose.

Adam J. Seldon is a fine writer and great travelling companion who has created a book that is worth reading on a range of levels.

David Cameron, The Real David Cameron Ltd

Adam J. Seldon has written a remarkable book. Rather than beginning with theories of schooling and searching for examples, he starts with schools themselves. He is a great listener, and this results in a rich and engaging exploration of what makes good schools and what education is ultimately for. The strength of *Around the World in 80 Schools* lies in its humanity. Seldon reminds us that schools are not simply mechanisms for producing examination results or university admissions; they are communities where young people learn who they are, how they relate to others, and how they can contribute to society. Across many countries, he uncovers powerful examples of belonging, trust, service, leadership, curiosity and hope. At a time when debates around education are often dominated by accountability measures, rankings and technical solutions, *Around the World in 80 Schools* invites us to think more deeply about the purposes of education. It is an inspiring, wise and highly readable contribution to the global conversation about schools and learning.

The lesson from Seldon's journey is that excellence is not the property of any one nation, system, philosophy or ideology. It emerges when schools combine high expectations with high relationships, knowledge with curiosity, and achievement with belonging. Adam J. Seldon has travelled the world to collect these lessons. Readers now have the privilege – and perhaps the obligation – to decide which of them should shape their next schooling journey.

John Hattie, author of *Visible Learning: The Sequel*

Policy makers, teachers and parents alike should read this book to understand what constitutes a great education and, as importantly, encounter practical inspiration for how it can be achieved.

Laura Hughes, Public Policy Commentator, *The Financial Times*

In among the pressures of delivering syllabi packed full of content, preparing for external inspection and producing test and exam outcomes that lead to a place sufficiently high up league tables, it is easy for the teacher or school leader in the UK to fail to lift their head up to survey objectively the education they are providing. To question what is being taught and how, what their goals and aims are, how they are supporting learners (and others in the school community) to thrive. And, importantly, whether there are other, and perhaps better, ways to 'do' education.

In this fascinating tour of a wide range of schools around the world, Adam J. Seldon shows us glimpses of different practices and challenges us to think more expansively, creatively and divergently. We meet the leader in Argentina who kisses 200 pupils each day to welcome them to school, follow the pupils on the Purchase Committee who barter and budget early each morning at Thai markets as they buy the food for the school lunches, and discover the peer correction system in place in Texas which places authority firmly with the students.

This book supports a mindset of exploration and institutional reflection. I recommend it to anyone who lacks the time to visit 80 schools worldwide themselves but is curious to challenge their thinking about why they do what they do in the way they do and whether there might just be a smarter approach out there.

Rachel Macfarlane, education consultant and
author on issues of educational equity and creating
the conditions for high performance for all

Here is a clarion call from the front line of teaching and schools. Adam J. Seldon was born into teaching, knows it and loves it widely and wisely. This is a teacher and reformer who has ploughed his field well, season after season, term after term. He has sown and harvested.

Around the World in 80 Schools is essential and inspiring reading for teachers, educators and parents everywhere.

Michael Morpurgo, author

An original and gripping read that shows the power of travel and learning from other cultures to both inform and inspire.

Matthew Parris, journalist

I enjoyed this book enormously – which is annoying, because Adam keeps showing us schools that are bold, hopeful and gloriously bothered about young people, and I found myself muttering, ‘Why aren’t we all doing more of this?’

Around the World in 80 Schools is a generous book, full of stories and ideas, but beneath it runs a quiet dissatisfaction with education as a transactional exercise. I recognise that sense of botheredness. I share it. Adam doesn’t offer silver bullets – thank goodness – but he does offer possibility. And sometimes that’s exactly what tired educators need: not certainty, but permission to imagine better.

Hywel Roberts, teacher, writer and speaker
www.botheredness.co.uk

In *Around the World in 80 Schools*, Adam distils the essence of schooling across the globe from the best of ingredients. His fermenting mix of experiences in such a wide variety of settings helps us to shed light on our own school system in a thoughtful and challenging way. The book is a real page-turner: absorbing, discomfiting and reassuring.

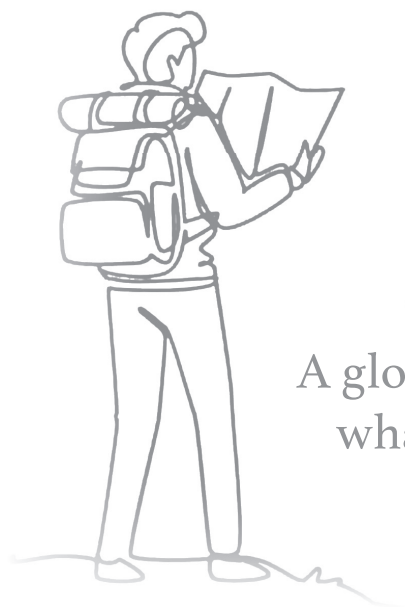
Mick Waters, educationalist and author

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Introduction

The seed

Coming down a mountain at the end of a Himalayan trek, I encountered two young teenage boys at the edge of a village, each with a large pile of leaves on their heads. They were completing morning chores on their way to school, my guide said. I told the boys how strong they were.

It transpired they had decent English and were delightfully curious. Our conversation was conducted while we negotiated some steep craggy steps. The ease with which these boys executed walking, chatting and carrying leaves on their heads was humbling.

The revelation that I was a teacher opened up a whole new set of questions which came bouncing from the boys, sending some hard-earned leaves tumbling from their heads.

‘How many different exercise books do your students have?’

The kind of niche question young children the world over might ask. They were impressed with my quickly calculated guess of nine. They had four.

I asked them how many students they have in their class. ‘Eighteen,’ they cooed in chorus. About twelve fewer than a typical class of mine for students their age.

I ventured a more challenging question as we entered the boys’ village: did they *like* their school?

‘Yes!’ they said as one.

I guessed that their school might lack computers or touch-screen monitors. But despite the dearth of the latest gadgets, they liked

it. Someone or something in that school was making them tick about their education.

As I sat in a truck whirring its way back to the city, I thought of the boys, likely by that time starting their first lesson – leaves dutifully dropped off, pens gripped in little hands, eagerly waiting to jot down new learnings in one of their four well-kept exercise books. I could not shake the sense that there was something of wider interest here. A seed had been planted. My desire to visit schools, from international metropolises to rural outposts, started to grow.

As a trainee teacher in London in the mid-2010s, I relished visits to other schools as part of my training. Schools have standard characteristics and features: classrooms, halls, playgrounds, offices, a labyrinth of corridors containing the odours of young people at various stages of development. The smell on occasion might be masked by a liberal spraying of potent deodorant by the boys, or girls squirting contraband perfume.

On another level though, there are discernible differences between them. These differences might be explicit, like the teaching. I was struck during one of my trainee placements by how much more text the students read each lesson compared to the school I taught at. Other differences might be more discreet, if no less important. In the lunch canteen, as my fellow trainee participants made small talk, I could not help but notice that none of the prefects shown on the display board were from year groups that were taking exams that year. This, I thought, was a clear message to students – and teachers – that nothing should distract students from their assessments during examination years.

When my formal training finished, the need to visit other schools generally stopped. It turns out, after a brief year or two of training in the UK, you can go a whole career without popping your head into the next-door classroom, let alone another school, despite there being over 30,000 in the country to choose from.

So, I'd hit my mid-twenties and my days of nosying around other schools seemed over. Until my Himalayan encounter.

Beginnings

Some of my earliest memories are not just of being at school but being immersed within a school community. My parents were both teachers at the school I eventually joined, and it was the kind of privileged place where the head teacher – my father – received a family home on school grounds. I would kick a football around the lawn on summer evenings in one of the school's main quads, keeping my head down but secretly hoping that some of the students staying on site might kick the ball back and we could play together. On dark winter evenings, I would weave my way through adult bodies looming over me in our family sitting room for some event, the aroma of nuts and heavy claret in the air, my dad blasting out dramatic film scores on the CD player. I recall tiptoeing my way down the stairs, as my father oversaw a meal in the dark-green panelled dining room. He orchestrated many a laugh and joyous memory in there. My mother would dutifully join, having completed her marking and circulated around the event while simultaneously cooking supper for her three children. I might sometimes even speak to teachers around the dinner table, to get their perspectives on school life that most students would not have access to. School was more than just a series of subjects – it was a community, a place of belonging and connection. Our house was a vicarage, where it was said come one, come all.

Growing older and becoming more inquisitive, I occasionally poked around the thank-you letters from my parents' students. Mum got things like, 'You've given me a love of literature I'll carry for life.' And Dad inspired affirmations like, 'You helped me to believe in myself.' The chance to influence someone when they are so malleable, to leave a small but indelible imprint, seemed a rare privilege.

Having moved school towards the start of sixth form, the contrast in the schools was noticeable. The previous one was moving up in the school league tables, but some students bemoaned it was losing its soul and becoming, as one friend put it at the time, more like a 'business'. In contrast, my new school had a palpable pride among staff and students. It got me thinking about what a good

school really is, and how often what people cherish is not the slip of paper with exam results in August, but the memories of special occasions combined with the day-to-day feeling of belonging.

While my two older siblings chose to pursue different careers, I decided to go into the family business. I think my parents were pretty happy that at least one of their children made that choice, but they never pushed. They managed to hit that delicate equilibrium of parenting – and indeed teaching – of encouraging me to find a purpose, without cajoling me in a particular direction.

In my final year reading history at university, a teaching programme presented itself. It seemed the ideal mechanism to educate children, irrespective of their background. I felt a desire to redress injustice, wanting to give back to society given my privileged circumstances, whether in my home life or schooling. Ego no doubt played a role too. The prospect of kids standing on their desks shouting ‘Oh captain, my captain’ at me, as in that famed scene in the film *Dead Poets Society*, held its appeal. I applied to the teaching programme, failed, applied again the following year, succeeded – and I was off.

My dad told me soon before I started out that it would take ten years before I could master the basics of teaching and even hope to inspire young people. I obligingly nodded, as sons often do when fathers give advice. I felt sure it would take me less. How wrong I was.

COVID-19 and the end of schools

On what should have been a bog-standard Wednesday commute back from work in March 2020, a year after my Himalayan encounter, there I was on the train, madly hitting refresh on the BBC live news feed on my phone, and then it came: Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announces public examinations are cancelled. Exams are off. School’s out. The shutting down of schools for the first time in modern British history – even during the Second World War they remained open.

The day after Williamson cancelled exams, I was perched on a student's desk as my colleague sat on her desk chair. 'Makes you think,' she said, reflecting both our pensiveness as we looked out at the empty classroom desks: 'What was the point of all that?' I knew what she meant: years of work with the Year 11s to get them over the prescribed line of formal qualifications.

When Williamson made his announcement, my mind immediately went to my Year 11 class. We were so close to the end, but it had been ripped away from them in a breath. In the rush of the day-to-day and teenage tantrums, it was easy to lose sight of the question: why are we here? But in that moment, the issue smacked me right in the face. Without the exams, without the qualification, what was the point of their education?

'You never want a serious crisis to go to waste,' Barack Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emmanuel, said to the President following the 2008 financial crisis.¹ The closure of schools during another global crisis twelve years later, this time a pandemic, sparked a renaissance of educational thinking. There was a sense that the way things were being done was not quite right: namely, a school system dominated by the dynamics of Ofsted (the English school regulator), examinations and schools existing solely to set young people up for the next stage, whether university or career.

Demands were made from across society to seize this moment to reimagine education, as it was breathlessly asked whether a more capacious vision for our schools could be realised. Commentators saw a chance to dip their oar into the now fashionable currents of education, proclaiming that COVID-19 necessitated school reform.

Yet, I was sceptical. It was somewhat irksome to read people encouraging me to tell my Year 11 class that 'it was not just about the qualification, but the learning itself', or to give some other vague rationale for their schooling. These proclamations rang hollow; they arose in a vacuum. You can't magic up a new meaning of education in 24 hours when the thing students hear about daily is GCSEs.

A pandemic in itself does not provide an intellectual underpinning for change. The educational renaissance was fleeting. As the pandemic petered out and society reopened, schools reverted back to the comfortable norm. Boldness was nudged aside. It was as if the pandemic had never happened.

Origins

‘It is difficult to appreciate, from the scant archaeological remains on this site, that this is one of the most significant places in the history of mankind,’ a placard proclaimed. The history is imprecise, but this was perhaps the first established school.

It was late 2021 and I was in Athens during the school holidays. After a temporary stint at a single-sex private school, I was now back in the state sector. COVID-19 travel restrictions had lifted as Britain’s education system returned to autopilot, and I was seeking inspiration. Where better to start than something untainted, at education’s roots?

Standing on the edge of the site, surrounded by the bustling traffic, it would be easy to walk past this place without noticing it: a few uneven walls, slabs of stone dotted around the dry grass, a couple of dusty pits. Yet world-changing and significant ideas and institutions often have unassuming birthplaces. The first meeting of the Chinese Communist Party took place in a classroom of a girls’ school in Shanghai, before moving to a boat on a lake in the rain, for fear that the school’s janitor was a spy.

Here I was, looking at the remains of a school set up by Aristotle in the fourth century BCE. Certain features were strikingly similar to a modern-day school. It possessed classrooms and an outside exercise space. Aristotle and his successors began to collect manuscripts and maps, thus creating the first renowned library in antiquity.

Aristotle had an ambitious vision of education, believing it should develop students in the round. Aristotle would walk with

students and discuss topics, hence why the school was called *peripatos*, which roughly translates as ‘strolling’. The morning stroll involved more complex academic discussions, while the evening stroll touched on broader issues. Here perhaps he might address the deeper questions of life. Some of my favourite conversations with students, where the direction roams more freely, have been on the move, usually on school trips.

Surveying the excavation site with the noise of the notoriously loud Athens traffic in my ears, it was humbling to see that what we do in schools today has a 2,500-year lineage. Though there are some modern-day markers, like computers, we have not moved on much. Much of what teachers do day-in-day-out, largely unthinkingly, is due at least in part to the decisions taken at this site by ancient Greeks. Yet it’s not exactly the same. My experience in English schools was that any broader purpose to education that schools might harbour, such as an Aristotelian notion of flourishing, were buried beneath the suffocating forces of metrics, whether exam scores or Ofsted judgements. Coming to one of education’s foundation sites showed how much more there was to learn.

Leaving to learn

I was leaning against the coffee table in the staffroom at my school in Edgware Road, central London. ‘Right, team – let’s gather round.’ The senior leaders used the word ‘team’ with staff, because there was a sense of being part of an ambitious mission. The school wanted to help give its relatively deprived students the chance to be the first in their family to attend university. I felt I was working with some of the best educators in the country and, by many standards, it was one of the top-performing state schools in England.

Still, schools seemed in a dire state. Instead of inducing reform, COVID-19 – among other factors – appeared to be influencing negative trends in a range of areas such as behaviour, mental

health and attendance.² Longer-term trends seemed bleak too: digital addiction among young people as reading declines, or teacher recruitment and retention targets continually missed.³

Though enjoying and feeling proud to work at the school, my Himalayan encounter returned to me on unexpected occasions whether in the classroom or alone on a walk. My mind's eye conjured up school settings filled with inspiration that the system I was currently in so desperately needed. Seeing schools abroad seemed a means to hold a mirror to and reflect on aspects of the British system. Schools are the ultimate shared civic institution. I wanted to see them in a range of places and communities, to see close up, these places of the most precious human interactions. And, to see what we could learn from them. Some might think features of the schooling system to be innate when in fact they are culturally and contextually contingent. John Maynard Keynes warned that 'the power to become habituated to his surroundings is a marked characteristic of mankind'.⁴ I frequently encountered signs of this once I'd started travelling. In one Argentinian school, I looked on in bafflement as the teacher at the school entrance gate kissed both cheeks of every single student that walked past. If I were to have undertaken a similar manoeuvre on gate duty, I likely would have been struck off.

Though international comparisons of countries, notably the OECD's annual publication of PISA tests, are informative, they represent data at a system level, rather than school level. They also assess a narrow aspect of educational output and what is testable, such as literacy and maths. PISA results being published led to much being written about the secret ingredients of high-performing systems, from Singapore to Finland.⁵ But there is so much more to schools. Some form of education has been around since the dawn of humanity, yet schools themselves are a relatively novel invention in the context of human existence. One principal I met in Ethiopia put it well: 'I am not sure we've figured schools out yet.'

A note on process

My lens is not from the system or policy level. Instead, I am taking a case studies, bottom-up approach. I wanted to hear the perspectives of students and teachers in the field and to witness the day-to-day practice of schooling. Writing on education can be vague and detached from the people that inhabit schools. But it is those people that are doing the work, experiencing and shaping schooling daily. I've also been pluralistic: seeking out a variety of cultures, contexts and educational methods. I've been led more by what I've seen in front of me and chosen to hone in on things I've thought noteworthy. There are many schools that I wanted to visit but for one reason or another could not. I have, however, visited eighty schools, all of which have influenced my thinking, even if they are not all directly referenced in this book.

I focus on breadth, rather than depth. The scope is broad, because schools are. They are crucibles of values and places of distinct organisational cultures. They give an insight into psychology and sociology, politics and history. They are both shaped by and shape the context they operate in. They can be places of aspiration and happiness, or places of despair. I've tried not to get bogged down in the minutiae. Discussions about how to sequence a particular subject curriculum, or precise guidance about teaching techniques, have had ample coverage elsewhere. I am not providing a codified blueprint or a 'how to' but focusing more on the 'what' and 'why'.

I am the product of and a teacher in British schools, and English ones at that. I tend to focus on elements that are in contrast to or, in my opinion, more effective than what English schools do, with a clear acknowledgement that I offer one experience in a tiny corner of a large system. Though I am at times critical of aspects of the English system, there are many fantastic schools, whether more traditional or innovative – some of which I have visited, some of which I hope to visit one day. There are many successes in the English system too, such as policy reforms influencing an improvement in literacy and maths by international comparison.

Rather than providing a list of solutions, I am lifting the lid, hoping to stimulate a broader discussion among professionals, commentators, parents and the engaged citizen. I do have my own stances, and these judgements will come out in how I report schools and analyse them, though I've tried to save the most explicit judgements until the conclusion.

There was something I felt sure of as I set out: that a solely transactional education is impoverished, and that schools can and should provide a better experience for young people. Children do not get a second shot at education. We want and need the one encounter to work, to be more than a means to an end. It should be an experience of lifelong cultivation.

While in the depths of planning A level lessons on the Tudors during one school holiday, I chanced across an audacious chap called George Abbot. Before ascending to the apex of the clergy as Archbishop of Canterbury – a moment of pride no doubt but a moment that likely marked a significant reduction in free time – Abbot in 1599 published *A Briefe Description of the Whole Worlde*.⁶ It felt a fitting metaphor for my own path. While I am not trying to describe the whole world, I found something inspirational about George Abbot's audacity and approach – namely that even brief descriptions have the potential to probe thinking and maybe even light a spark.

Around the World in 80 Schools is essential and inspiring reading for teachers, educators and parents everywhere.

Michael Morpurgo, author

In an increasingly unstable world it is left to schools to shape our future generations. Yet in places like the UK and the US education systems are falling short. The unthinking doctrine that dominates schools rarely asks the fundamental questions: What makes a good school? What is education for? and How can schools best prepare young people for the future? Purpose has been replaced by metrics, resulting in falling attendance, recruitment crises, low teacher morale and widespread wellbeing concerns.

Around the World in 80 Schools highlights standout schools that reject this narrow focus. Adam Seldon visited schools across every continent, from elite institutions in metropolises like Mumbai and the first communist school in China, to schools in Africa's largest slums and those run by refugee children in rural Thailand. He celebrates places where education is understood as more than academic outcomes or a step up the ladder and explores how different cultures and contexts define what makes a good school.

An original and gripping read that shows the power of travel and learning from other cultures to both inform and inspire.

Matthew Parris, journalist

Read this book to understand what constitutes a great education and, as importantly, encounter practical inspiration for how it can be achieved.

Laura Hughes, Public Policy Commentator, *The Financial Times*

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Rachel Macfarlane, education consultant and author

The lesson from Seldon's journey is that excellence is not the property of any one nation, system, philosophy or ideology.

John Hattie, author of *Visible Learning: The Sequel*

Adam Seldon is a secondary school teacher and former head of year and head of history at King Solomon Academy. From a young age Adam has lived in schools and has not been able to get out of them since. His parents, Joanna and Anthony Seldon, were both teachers. After almost ten years in the classroom he realised that British schooling needed a shot of perspective from beyond its borders.

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