

Response to request for information re the role of schools in preparing young people for the future.

After teaching in mainstream schools through the 1970s, I worked from 1981 - 2010 (initially as teacher, from 1984 as head) in institutions providing for young people in the following 'categories:

- permanently excluded;
- referred into alternative provision;
- in the care of the local authority;
- sentenced to a period of time in a young offender institution (known then as CHE).

I have tried to begin by identifying the core 'need' for this group of young people to become 'successful' adults and then to consider the broader needs of the school population.

It is never 'good' to start from a negative but, without exception, the young people I worked with found little that benefitted them within the mainstream sector. Most hated their time there and were very pleased to be 'out' of it: I often read that young people are angry and further damaged by their 'removal' from the mainstream - this does not match my experience. There is an interesting debate to be had around whether mainstream education can best meet the needs of all young people or whether there is a requirement for a raft of different provisions. I know little, but I do know that those adults who work successfully with the most D2M (difficult to manage - young people who often look to violence, physical or verbal, to manage perceived conflict) students require both a particular disposition (particularly a happiness with themselves 'as is', a calmness and a lack of self importance) and good ongoing professional development. There are some excellent 'mainstream' teachers who simply are not 'cut out' for working with D2M students.

In preparing young people from difficult / troubled backgrounds for successful transition to adulthood, there are two key 'elements':

1. skilled appropriate staff providing mentoring;

2. a loosening of the laws that have been enacted to ensure that young people remain in education - those laws are laudable in intent (I hope the intention was to ensure rights of access, not to improve employment statistics), but the law of unintended consequence applies: for some young people 'early access' to the world of work (provided that is properly monitored) is far more beneficial than remaining within a fields of knowledge education environment.

All young people require a strong relationship or relationships with an appropriate adult. Most young people forge key relationships within their extended family group or at school: for some no such relationship exists. Within that/those relationship(s) they can establish a positive identity (as opposed to an 'outsider' identity), learn about responsibility (the key to freedom), rights (theirs and those of others) and generate positive life plans. Without such a relationship, a young person is rudderless, and will usually seek the 'belonging' they need from sections of society that most would consider 'undesirable' / inappropriate.

In many ways I think curriculum content to be less important than the development of the mentoring relationship for these students. It is over simplistic to say that all these students require access to a vocational curriculum, but students who abhor the classroom often 'blossom' in a different environment. Two examples from my current caseload are:

- A young man who comes from a settled traveller family (male role models within the family espouse violence as the solution to most problems) and has a history of verbal and physical violence towards teachers. He uses violence when he feels stupid or treated with disrespect. He has been identified as having special needs and came to us with extremely low attainment levels. I have worked with him to develop a realistic plan for what he might achieve upon leaving school. He has attended a local start up class for potential entrepreneurs and worked in small businesses (building, landscaping, gardening, garage) alongside studying a core curriculum of maths, English and technology. He has attained accreditation in technology (he is particularly skilled at web design, and has already designed a website for the small business that he is running at weekends) and is sitting GCSE examinations in maths and English. We were able to encourage him to engage in these

subjects when they were presented to him as providing him with the skills he will require in business.

- A second young man (attended our Merseyside Centre) was referred following lengthy disengagement from education. His family were 'outsiders' in their community, often the butt of local bullies. He had been bullied at school and simply found classrooms 'horrible places' (his description). There has been seemingly endless dispute between his mother and the authorities re his non attendance with little attempt to find solutions, merely to punish. The difference between this student when he is 'forced' to attend an educational institution (withdrawn, seething with anger and bitterness, labelled as thick) and when he works after school in his father's 'yard' (father runs a delivery business) is beyond words. Here he is warm, open, confident and able to organise the work of men far senior to him in years. He has sound basic mathematical skills and communicates well with his workmates; he responds efficiently to telephone and email requests. We have bent the law in enabling him to work longer hours here than the law technically allows, I have mentored him and he has worked with me on his maths and English skills. We also identified a love of music and he has been attending a local free school specialising in music for some of his week.

To meet the needs of troubled / disadvantaged young people we need:

- thoughtful, intelligent, charismatic role models:
- a willingness to pursue a solution focussed approach (what will work for this young person?) so long as the 'solution' is moral and does not involve any 'abuse' of the young person and has clearly identified desirable outcomes, as opposed to trying to make them fit whatever system is 'designed' for them... history is littered with school failures who have shone beyond school.

More broadly (ie what should the 'mainstream' be doing?):

In 1990 I attended a conference at which Ted Wragg began his contribution with the reminder that all of us needed to prepare young people for life in the twenty first century. He had then only a tiny inkling of the technological changes that were afoot. It is inconceivable that any one of us might know

what the world will look like for those young people now entering education when they leave. It appears (to me), however, undeniable that a fields of knowledge curriculum is redundant ... what young people require is a) the knowledge of where to access 'information and b) the capacity to consider and challenge all information... is it valid, is it reliable, what constitutes a fact, how might we know that this is an objective representation of an event? The current EU debate illustrates perfectly the need for the capacity to evaluate arguments presented as 'factual'. Information has long been available through literature, but has never been so readily available in such volume or regardless of the location of the person requiring access. The world has changed.

There is a movement entitled 'expansive pedagogy' that argues that educators should always have a 'split screen... so if I am 'teaching' maths I should have some clear aims regarding what I want students to learn (mathematical skills and knowledge), but I should also, ongoingly, have a clear idea what personal attributes and social skills I want my students to deliver. We must design learning opportunities that enable students to engage with appropriate academic skills, but also make clear what personal attributes (eg tolerance as opposed to bigotry, ecological rather than rapacious, simply kind not callous) and what skills we want (eg self control, resilience, creativity).

My understanding of the really successful technology companies is that they appoint on the basis of such skills rather than 'prior knowledge'... and I know that those skills are essential for forming strong relationships in adulthood, and for positive parenting, should the student choose to pursue that role.

Dr Bob Sproson June 2016