

# EDUCATION

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## You know, education is more important than football

**I**T gave me great pleasure, along with half of the UK, to watch the progress of the Welsh football team in the Euros and the success of Leicester in the Premier League.

The passion and excitement surrounding the progress of these two teams was unbelievable. It struck me that, given that the North East of England is increasingly described as lagging behind the rest of the UK with regard to education, one question worth asking would be 'do we care less about education than the rest of the country here in the north east?' or even 'do we care less about the education of children than football?' Can we develop a similar obsession and enthusiasm for education?

Education needs to be right up front in our north eastern mentality. Education is so deep into everything that sometimes we forget it's there.

This year a British spaceman, Tim Peake, spent some time in a space station. I would expect that he found

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out that the simple necessity of having oxygen to breathe quite a thing.

Sometimes I wish we could close every school and university in the North East - just for one year. Take the oxygen out of our society. Then after 12 months ask people if they noticed. I hope they might realise that something important was missing!

When I hear politicians say 'Education, Education, Education' they may not be necessarily talking about learning. Education is the process through which a society passes on the knowledge, values and skills from one generation to another. That is the present emphasis.

Learning can be defined as the acquiring of new skills, knowledge and values.

A few weeks ago I was asked by my granddaughter 'Grandad, how did I learn to talk?' As I was thinking of the answer she said 'I bet it is really difficult and tough' I didn't give a great answer, even though we know more about the process of learning than at any time in our history. For some reason we have made education appear complicated and hard and sidelined learning.

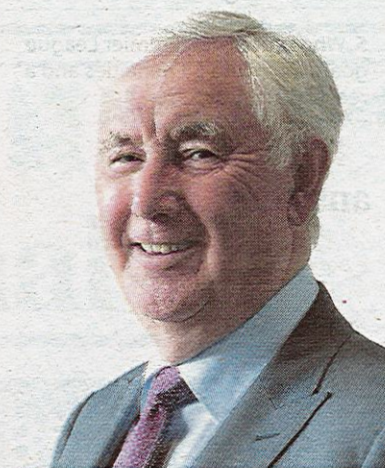
Let me make a dramatic and obvious statement. 'Our education system must involve learning'. Learning will drive our future.

Our attitude to education can be compared to how we dealt with the telephone. Before smartphones, owned by smart people, we built bright red phone boxes. We had telephone 'operators' and if we needed

to contact someone we had to get to a telephone box or a house with a phone. Today phone boxes are dead. This was a paradigm shift. No one spotted the implications of the mobile phone. And yet our education system, designed in the analogue age, is often untouched by the digital age.

When I enter a modern operating theatre in the Freeman Hospital I am struck by the dramatic difference between the butchery of 19th century medicine and modern technological surgery.

If my grandfather entered a classroom today he would consider very little has changed over the last one hundred years. A modern hospital patient would be horrified at the thought of being taken through a



► Les Walton

process similar to that of a 19th century operating theatre. 4G Technology, 3D computer aided design and virtual reality should be blowing our

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education system out of the water.

When I was standing in the queue at Buckingham Palace about to be awarded the CBE, in front of me was an MP, about to be knighted. When I explained I was a teacher, he, without invitation, extolled the benefits of being caned. "It never did me any harm." "Neither did using leeches to cure the plague", was my response. Those were the last words he may have remembered before being tapped on his shoulder by a sword.

Why then do politicians, and indeed parents, hark back to the past, to 'traditional education'? Of course they do have a point, proven methods should be kept. However, we must not live in the past when instruction was dominant and chalk and slate were king. The 'good old days' were not always good.

Since I was born in 1945 there has been a tension. Is education about content, process or outcomes? For too long the pendulum has swung rapidly from side to side. Political positions in the North East have been, and even now, are being staked out.

Going back to my favourite theme - hospital operations - I suspect when I was under the knife for bowel cancer my thoughts were about what was being done to me and also how it was being done. I was also slightly concerned about the outcome - would I live? After I decided I would live, my thoughts then turned to my quality of life.

Great surgeons and great education leaders are concerned about process, content, outcomes and impact on the quality of life for young people. Leaders, who tell me not to bother about the morale of teachers and children as long as the results are good, do not understand education. Equally, those who talk about the love of learning at the expense of outcomes are just as limited.

Neither polarity is good enough. Billions have been poured into research into the origins of the universe and the relationship between space and time. We now need to invest in educationalists that are searching for a more unified theory of learning an 'education theory of everything'. Perhaps my part in the system is to encourage someone to take up the mantle of being the Stephen Hawking of schools. Is anyone out there?

**I**N February 2016 I spoke at a conference in Manchester. After I had spoken one headteacher announced that his main objective was to ensure children could understand a preposition and the fundamentals of grammar. Another announced that he 'didn't care about world peace'. Another majored on the need to test young people - 'so we know what we are dealing with'.

Scarily, we still believe that if we test a child at seven it is a predictor for how he or she will achieve at seventy-seven. Albert Einstein did not speak until he was four. He did not read until he was seven. When he was asked years later why he did not speak he said that he was still trying to work out the correct question to ask! If Albert Einstein was educated within our modern education system, the school would probably have been concerned about his impact on their test results.

When Jesus said 'The meek shall



inherit the earth' part of the intention would be to make people think. I can understand Jesus getting a bit cheesed off when the Pharisees asked him what were his quantifiable objectives and would what he was saying push the Hebrew nation up the league tables.

A large part of our job is to teach children to think, which leads to learning. Unfortunately, many of the new leaders in education have a narrow view of education and want to close windows to the world, or at least reduce visibility. Certainly most of the books I read as a teenager would not appear in the DfE definitive list of classic books.

**O**UR children are faced with two critical challenges. The gap between the rich and poor and a world in transformation.

We look at our children within the north east and we know that the gap between the schools which take the poorest of the poor and the schools which take the more fortunate, is widening by the minute. We know this is happening. We blame the headteachers, the schools, the parents and even the children. We talk about 'closing the gap' but we know we have designed a system which deliberately and coldly maintains the breach between the successful and unsuccessful.

We also know our children are faced with significant changes. Coal is no longer as important, oil may soon go the same way. According to Stephen Hawking artificial intelligence will take over from human intelligence. Women procreate without men; sea levels are rising; ethnic and religious cleansing continues apace; worldwide pandemics are a scary reality; and mass population exodus is a major issue for our time. One third of our lives will be in post

occupation retirement. The people who will face these issues are sitting in our classrooms today.

Our children need more than academic studies, the Education Baccalaureate and 'a broad and balanced curriculum'. Being clever is not enough. Being clever has never been enough. They will need to learn how to learn, to adapt, adopt and continually improve. Knowing the passive tense and the 100 best works of English literature is only useful if they are aids to continual improvement and happiness.

Adaptability, based on transferable skills, will be essential. Our young people will need to be enterprising as well as compassionate. To put it simply, they will have to do far better than we have ever done.

**I**VISITED Machu Pichu in Peru last summer. This was the Inca Capital built around 1450. The area was prone to earthquakes. The Incas had worked out that if they designed buildings in a certain way with windows and doors which sloped inwards and blocks that were laid together in a particular design their cities would last for hundreds of years and would withstand earthquakes which flatten our modern cities. An Inca had the intellectual curiosity to understand the impact of earthquakes and design a solution which would last for a thousand years.

This Inca was the archetypal teacher, sitting on a mountain surrounded by children who would have joined in the simple, but ever so profound question: 'how do we survive in a world which we don't understand?'

The simple point and profound truth is that learning is a consequence of thinking. The Incas knew this and so should we.

Ah, yes.  
Mrs Einstein,  
I'm afraid  
we need to  
talk about  
Albert

Understand the difference between education and instruction. Consider the difference between sex education and sex instruction. Sex education should stimulate young people to think about how they deal with relationships and situations which they may encounter in the future. Sex instruction is a whole different ball game.

In school I was totally turned off foreign languages. In my twenties I met Marie Therese Raskop from Germany. Speaking a foreign language became important to me. Within a year I was reasonably fluid in German. The bottom line is learning has to do with a hunger to make sense of something. Whether it be earthquakes or German girlfriends. The whole brain, including the emotions, has to be engaged. If you separate emotion from intellect, you court disaster.

**S**O what are we saying at the moment? The most audible cry seems to be about the under-performance of our teachers. Oddly enough though, every advanced economy in the world is also saying that teachers have suddenly started to underachieve. We are also announcing that our local authorities, our academy sponsors, our further education colleges and the Department for Education itself are all failing too.

So if we want to improve the education system, we must understand the whole system.

One of my favourite programmes on TV is Sherlock, starring Benedict Cumberbatch. Even Sherlock never walked into a room and saw everything. He only saw what he was looking for. We are developing a sense of educational autism amongst our school leaders. They only see what they are looking for.

National figures, who should know better, seem to see 'failing schools', 'failing pupils' existing in 'failing regions'. When they talk about the lack of good mathematics and English teachers they do not see their own part in the system which creates such a shortage. Even worse, they cannot see the system, because they are not looking beyond their own narrow perspective.

Like someone who can understand the component parts of a rifle, some only understand the working of small and discrete parts of the whole system. Unfortunately, they don't understand the sum of the parts. Worse still they don't understand what they are firing at and why.

Learning is about making connections between the known and the new. It is a highly reflective activity that is about personal and continuous improvement. The question we should ask ourselves is what have we learned over the last week, month, year. Have we changed our views or are we reinforcing the narrow perspectives we have held from the beginning?

Are our schools places that encourage reflection? Do young minds formulate hypotheses that link a study of history with, for instance, the issues of global warming, with economic instability, with matters of equity and sustainability as well as their own potential earning capacity? Do our education leaders understand the link between the higher education supply chain of graduates, salaries, inspection and league tables, as well as their own learning capacity?

Whilst travelling around Peru I visited the grave of Perez, the Conquistador who wanted to destroy Inca culture for the sake of the Catholic

faith. When I look at the Inca temples, statues and art that was deliberately destroyed by the Catholic fundamentalists, understandably I made the link with the actions of the 'So Called Islamic State'.

THAT is what the world needs from education. The ability to see the big picture, the understanding of the relationships within the big picture and how learning can improve the world we live in, is essential.

If we are unable to understand the whole picture and how the system works then all of us, politicians, civil servants, everyone - will have failed disastrously. Cleverness will never be enough; in fact, it could be dangerous. Our country desperately needs creativity, and the ability to think holistically and ethically. We have to understand that dynamic leadership recognises the need for rational planning as well as chaotic creativity. Great leaders engage with both. Poor leaders only plan and bad leaders only think.

**T**O conclude may I offer 10 key challenges to all of us within the North East.

#### **About learning:**

Regain our joy of learning and passion for education

Teach young people to think.

Instructing and measuring our children are not enough. Teaching someone to fish is better than giving them a fish

Care about the content and the process and the outcomes of education and how it impacts on quality of life

Design a curriculum for a new future, not the past - ask how relevant is this for my child's future?

Apply innovation and technology to the process of learning

#### **About the North East of England:**

Have a new look at the North East - look for positives within our education system. Having found them build on them. We have brilliant young people living among us

Be ready to accept the often low starting point for many of our children and believe we can do something about it - celebrate those who take on supposedly hopeless causes

Understand that we are all responsible for education - politicians, teachers, parents, businesses and so on. Join the forces of public, private and political to transform the system - avoid the blame culture

Value heritage and tradition whilst at the same time challenge the status quo and our own narrow picture and expectations of education within the north east - be our own critical friend and welcome newcomers who bring new ways of thinking

Be objective about our own area, understand the big picture - and properly assess our strengths and weaknesses.

I am sure there can be a passion for education within the north east, equal to our passion for football. We also must believe that when teams are relegated or schools are not succeeding it is not because they choose to fail.

We need to understand the education system in our region and take individual responsibility for its transformation. Caring is not enough. We need to rediscover our love of learning and understand how learning can address the regional blockages to improvement. No school or child is an island; they are part of a bigger whole. It takes a whole village to educate a child; it takes the whole of the North East to transform our schools.