
A Socially Inclusive A-star is Only Possible through the Understanding of Black Holes

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ABSTRACT This article is written by young people who attend an open-access youth project in the city centre of Hull. Although they describe themselves as 'educational failures' (the 'black holes'), they argue that they have a significant contribution to make to discussions about how to develop socially just education in schools. In the article, they share their personal stories about how they became disconnected from formal education and they identify critiques of the current system of schooling which, in their view, prioritises the 'A-star' students. They also explain how their educational experiences have been turned around through their involvement with The Warren in Hull, an organisation which adopts an informal, person-centred pedagogy.

Introduction

People they come together
People they fall apart
No one can stop us now
'Cause we are all made of stars
(Moby, 2002)

The narrative around the pursuit of educational attainment is littered with celestial references – A-star, reaching for the stars, star pupil, shining star – the list goes on and on. Given that this exhaustive drive for excellence has resulted in a record 49,120 teachers quitting education in 2013-14 alone, an increase of 3480 on the previous year (Boffey, 2015), this would indicate that there is more than a glint of fool's gold glitter about this A-star obsessed system; a system that those 3000 educated, capable, intelligent adults simply could not

tolerate a moment longer. If that system damages teachers to the extent that they abandon their careers to start along a new pathway through life, then what is it doing to children and young people for whom the earliest hope of escape is to reach an eighteenth birthday?

We, the young people of The Warren Youth Project in Hull, know exactly the damage it is doing, because it was done to us. We are early survivors of the first salvos of an educational war waged in the name of targets, league tables and A-stars; a war that views 'success' through a narrow prism, views inclusion as a sacrificial lamb and views us as uneducated collateral damage. We are not uneducated. Through our experiences at The Warren, we have learnt that 'education' and 'learning' can be done differently.

Young People's Experiences of Education

Beth, 22, had a challenging time at school:

When I was at the end of Year 8, I had the whole world in front of me. I wanted to be a marine biologist. I loved the ocean, the creatures that live in it – The Deep Submarium [a huge aquarium] is my favourite place in Hull. I was A* level in science, even doing extra work on top of what I had to do, but then I had an accident and my face got smashed up and it went downhill from there. Nobody seemed to recognise this and thought 'oh, that could be why Beth's grades are slipping'. I wish that they had noticed. They might have been able to find different ways for me to learn, such as offering more supported learning, and being more patient with me. I struggled to concentrate so I couldn't get anything done. I still struggle to concentrate now.

Through her involvement with The Warren and with other local support services, Beth has managed to reflect on her previous experiences and consider her future. She is currently unemployed but is considering doing a university degree in youth and community work so that she can use her own experiences to support other young people.

Jack, 22, has an understanding of the personal consequences of being in a school that did not recognise his needs:

School is meant to be some of the best days of our lives but for me it was some of the most difficult. I am gay and I was 'outed' by my best friend at the age of 13, which meant that everyone soon found out. Then the bullying began and from what I could see, the teachers didn't seem to do anything to stop this. I felt as if one even punished me for my sexuality. It was horrific. I also had mental health issues that were undiagnosed. By the age of 14 I'd started hearing voices and having hallucinations but I didn't feel this was taken seriously. I experienced massive bouts of depression and my behaviour was getting worse. I was lashing out and I was punished

for my behaviour and put in isolation. By 16 I'd attempted suicide over fifteen times which has led to health issues in later life. Looking back, I feel that the people who were meant to help me shape my life weren't able to support me – the doctors and the teachers. I feel that the scores in our exams are looked upon as more important than our mental health and this is sad. I think I was failed by the education system – and people like me need to help design a better system that doesn't fail other young people.

Jack is now a volunteer at The Warren Youth Project in Hull campaigning for social justice on a number of issues including LGBTQ rights. Through accessing a range of support from The Warren and elsewhere, he is also successfully managing his mental health.

Danny, 25, also vividly remembers his school experiences:

They didn't seem to understand how I learned. So I started skipping school and then eventually I was expelled. I went back but was expelled again. I felt as if nobody tried to find out my background or find out about me. I don't think they tried to support me – it seemed as if expelling me was the easiest option for them. It felt like they didn't care about the after effects.

Re-engaging with Learning through a Different Approach

We have heard that there is a groundswell of will to change the education system – including initiatives like the Freedom to Learn Project – and we think that's great. But those initiatives need to avoid viewing young people through a narrow prism – a prism of pity. We want to be seen as centrally essential to the success of any initiative that seeks to build an inclusive education system, because we are not 'uneducated'; in fact we are highly educated in the consequences of being failed by our own schools in terms of our happiness, mental health, relationships and career prospects. We believe that the system is flawed because it does not meet all young people's needs, and we know the system inside out. Educators are missing out on the potentially influential benefits of our input if they do not listen to us.

We all came to The Warren when we left school – some of us came straightaway, and for others, it took a few years before we found our way there. The Warren is a free, open-access drop-in centre in the middle of Hull. It is for all young people aged 16-25 (and in the case of counselling, for those aged over 10). The Warren has a completely different view of 'learning' to anything that we experienced at school. It's not about classes or timetables or teachers. The Warren has a much more informal person-centred approach to learning (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994; Jeffs & Smith, 2005) which means that anything and everything can be seen as learning. Some of us have used the music recording studio, some have done a short course with a qualification and others have learnt through working as volunteers. Whatever we have done, we have been

valued and respected and our voices have been heard. If we don't like something, then we can change it. If we have a suggestion for something new, then we can make this happen. We are never forced to do anything. We can make the rules of the project ourselves and we can make decisions about what 'learning' should be offered. We can work at our own pace. This is really different from school, and because of this, we have managed to get involved with education again.

Reclaiming Our Place at the Heart of Education

In a world of A-stars, there is a danger that those who feel that they have been failed by the formal education system are viewed as 'black holes'. This might mean that you think we are empty, with nothing inside. However, a closer look at Stephen Hawking's lectures on black holes helps us to think differently about them. He says:

From the outside, you can't tell what is inside a black hole ... a black hole contains a lot of information that is hidden from the outside world. (Hawking, 2008)

In a sense, we believe we are the 'black holes' of education. We're full of knowledge and understanding of how the system went wrong. We have a lot of information that is currently hidden from the outside world, information that might be useful to you. So avail of that knowledge and use us.

We want you to place us at the heart of any revised education system. We believe you should include young people in all boards of governors in every seat of learning in the country. This could be from pre-school to university level. Placing us and our experience at the heart of the education system will help turn around the parts that are failing. We have experiences of where this has happened, so we feel we know what to look out for.

Jack believes such a proposal would avoid tokenism:

I'd make sure that young people's voices and young people were represented when decisions are made. But not just through school councils because, in my view, they don't always represent the views of all young people. They sometimes create an illusion that young people's voices are being heard, but people who are struggling at school are often missed. In my school, the members of school council were usually those with good grades and high levels of attendance. People with issues at home or with extra needs usually didn't get their voices heard. We can help avoid tokenism by talking to every student, not just a select few, to ensure a proper representative voice.

Danny would see his role on a board of governors as somebody who should be digging deep into the issues that are going on for students:

If I was on a Board I'd try and notice the 'naughty ones' – as teachers call them. And I'd question why they were behaving in this way and I'd share my experience to make sure that how it is for them isn't how it was for me. Having somebody like me on a board of governors would work, not just somebody who passed through school with good grades. They need somebody like me so they have a chance to learn that if they're just focusing on 'good' students, they're just getting a one-way flow of traffic, they're not getting other people's views are they? I'd want to find out why a kid is struggling or naughty and instead of expelling, I'd be digging deep for the reasons why.

Ciara, 18, would hold a school to account:

I understand what it's like to be bullied. Bullying starts off with slight differences and grows to hatred if it's not clamped down on quickly enough. I'd want to know what sort of schemes a school has got in place to ensure that children are not being bullied. It's all very well saying you've got a zero-tolerance policy on bullying but what are you actually doing to make sure it doesn't happen?

The A-star system is already collapsing in thousands of tiny ways, 49,120 of which are those teachers who left the profession (Boffey, 2015). We want to help, so put us – those who you see as having 'failed' – at the heart of the education system. We don't just want to be consulted. We want to be taken seriously and to be given a chance. But we have to be at the heart of it.

Conclusion

As Professor Hawking himself said recently:

Black holes ain't as black as they are painted. They are not the eternal prisons they were once thought. Things can get out of a black hole, both to the outside, and possibly, to another universe. So, if you feel you are in a black hole, don't give up. There's a way out. (Hawking, 2008)

We, the young people of The Warren, believe that we are proof that with the right support there is a way out. We have brought a souvenir for you from our dead-star travels: the whereabouts of an alternative education universe where all young people can radiate and burn more brightly than you ever thought possible.

And we can tell you how to find it.

References

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This article has been instigated and written by four young people who participate in The Warren in Hull, supported by J.J. Tatten (Warren Coordinator). For the past 30 years, The Warren Youth Project – an independent charity – has been providing vital support services to marginalised and vulnerable young people in Hull. The Warren has a commitment to ensuring that all young people are listened to, respected and get the support and the space and time that they need to take control of their own lives and make informed choices. For more information, www.thewarren.org. Correspondence: jjtatten@thewarren.org