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From Concrete to Bamboo: my crash course through education

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ABSTRACT Clover Hogan is a 20-year-old climate activist, researcher on turning anxiety into agency from Australia, and the founder of Force of Nature. In this article, she talks about how education is a 'system of rote, churning out worker bees for the hive' and, through education, children are manipulated and scared into abiding by the regulatory rules. It was only when she went to Green School in Bali that she realised this, because they weren't conventional and took a more holistic approach to teaching and developing young minds by working on all three learning modalities, using the environment surrounding them. She then decided to upturn the standardised education system and show that students aren't just only made to pass exams; they are a whole mixture of things, and it's only when a school begins to develop their understandings of nature that flexibility in the system will happen. And those lessons make those students more equipped to be happy and to help the planet in every way [*written by Lucy Gibbons on behalf of Clover Hogan*].

Flying cars, artificial intelligence, pig–human hybrids – such is the reality of the 21st century. Since the Industrial Revolution, society's rate of change has been accelerating. However, one industry – arguably the most important in our evolution – has been left in a dusty corner of the 20th century: education.

Growing up in an Australian town of 6000, my formal education started at a small Catholic school where lessons on times tables and spelling were shrouded in the holy robes of indoctrination. At the age of five, I told my atheist father that it was God who created the birds and the bees. He stared at me with barely contained alarm, and with good reason; having been sent to a religious boarding school before his sixth birthday, he was still dealing with the after-effects of a faith-based education. 'Sweet Mother Superior was the worst,' Dad would later tell me. 'She took Jesus's words "Suffer the little children ... " literally. Kids were marched into the assembly hall, wearing just their lightweight cotton pyjama shorts, and forced onto their hands and knees in

front of the whole school. In the end I didn't care much about pain or bruises, I could process that; it was having to stand by powerless and watch other kids being brutalised and humiliated that really worked. That scarred me for life.'

But my teachers didn't take the 'hands-on' approach (even if the Christian school across town did), and there were some truly wonderful ones in the bunch, so I stuck around.

By fourth grade (age 9-10), my educators had dropped the pretence of school as a funhouse, and revealed it to be a system of rote learning to churn out worker bees for the hive. This is also when girls discover that, to rule the playground, they must climb over a body or ten. Outside the crucifix-adorned classroom, I was bullied mercilessly by a four-foot tyrant, and inside it, our teacher (the love child of Jesus and Krusty the Clown) got off on scaring his students into submission. This resulted in my deep loathing of school, and I wasn't the only kid who made themselves physically ill to avoid walking through the dreaded school gates.

My parents pulled me out and enrolled me in the only real alternative our town had to offer – the Christian school (which had since changed its 'disciplinary measures'). The teachers were an irregular patchwork of those who, in the main, resented their jobs and the students they taught, and the few who were genuinely invested in feeding our young, hungry minds. My English teacher, one of the latter, brought Turkish delight into the classroom and read Narnia to us in a melodic voice that made me fall in love with literature. She asked that I dedicate my first book to her. Eight years old, I promised, with reverence, that I would.

My fellow comrades shared a similar love–hate relationship with this academic institution. However, the scales dipped in one direction as too much time was spent cramming our brains with information to be cited at a later date, and too little imagining fantastical places. Religion continued to pervade our studies, but the little girl who believed in God had moved on, and I spent just as much energy rebelling as I did passing exams. My love for debate was honed as I battered my teachers over the ethical and moral contradictions of the Bible. The education system wasn't developing my character, but my reaction against it was. Frustrated with the lack of answers, I was yearning for a new horizon.

It was then, at age 12, that I reluctantly attended a summer camp in the Indonesian jungle. Designed to help young people arm themselves for the Battle of Life, the programme taught us handy tools like speed-reading and memory techniques (now long forgotten), as well as guiding lessons like 'Sitting in the Chair of No Regrets' (which has stuck, my metaphorical bum forever enlightened). By the end of it, I felt like a changed tween. Yet the thing that impacted me most wasn't the programme so much as the unique institution behind it – which, 12 months later, I would cross oceans to enrol in full-time.

Green School is the stuff of kids' dreams. An architectural wonder made entirely from bamboo, it was founded by a man who struggled with dyslexia in school. His original vision was to create a safe haven for children with learning disabilities, but Green School quickly evolved into an internationally acclaimed

institution that produces individuals who flourish outside the boundaries of mainstream education. Lessons are designed to foster a student's passions, engage all three learning modalities (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic), and are anything but conventional.

As an example: in my first year at Green School, we read *Lord of the Flies*. But rather than have us merely study from the page, our teacher dumped us on an uninhabited island off Bali's coast to better understand the true meaning of William Golding's words. We built huts and rafts, ate over campfires, and beat back fears of the dark – all while trying to establish our social dynamics without landing anyone on a spike.

Green School is a place where kids and teachers alike get excited about learning. It has its own failings, but beyond the mud-wrestling pits, whiff of compost toilets and marimba floating on the breeze, it's a place that takes education to another realm entirely. Green School is a cathedral to nature; and its religion, one I happily subscribed to, is environmentalism.

Which is why it came as such a shock to everyone when, at 16, I quit the Balinese jungle for a concrete one – waving goodbye to study at a lycée, or French high school, in Toulouse. The decision was spurred by two things: the belief – drilled into me over years of standardised education – that learning should be emotionally demanding (in a way that Green School simply wasn't) and the allure of beating the unbeatable. I wanted to prove that I was every bit as capable of succeeding in a rigid system as a flexible one. So I immersed myself in one of the most institutionalised learning curricula in the world – in a foreign language.

Lycées herd students into three categories: economics and politics, mathematics and science, and literature and the arts. While my early education had asked students to study the full spectrum of subjects, the French system expects students at age 15 to focus on one of three areas. It fails to recognise the obvious – that people are inherently multidimensional.

The bureaucratic approach to teaching often felt like a reproduction of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*. Ironically, we watched this film in my equally comical English class (which I failed for using 'Australian English'). My classmates seemed oblivious to the parallel between us and the sheep being projected onto the screen.

When passing professors in the hallway, we averted our eyes in deference and continued huddling from class to class, exam to exam. The profs, to their credit, were doing their best to prepare students for the harsh reality of baccalaureate exams. With the right marks, these are a French teen's ticket to university and a well-paid career – a life that plods along as the Good Lord (or Big Brother ... is there a difference?) intended. If students fail to score highly enough, there is no mere 'retake' but a redo of their entire final year.

When I told my lycée friends of the Green School, they looked at me like I was mad – either thinking it a figment of my imagination or horrified that I'd willingly left such a place.

In Toulouse, I realised the mistake I'd made. This institutionalised learning felt more alien and incongruent with the modern world than ever before, and four months in, I was teetering on the edge of mental and emotional collapse. Having failed to 'beat the system', I felt ashamed at how desperately I wished to return to Green School. But then, one afternoon, as I sprawled on the floor of my kitchen contemplating how I might go about homeschooling, I received a text from my best friend in Bali. She and a group from Green School were headed to Paris for the 21st annual climate negotiations.

Despite my rejection of God's existence, in that moment, it did feel as if someone up there was waggling their fingers.

I packed my bags and cobbled my savings together to buy a train ticket to Paris. The City of Light was bitterly cold, but nothing could dampen the elation I felt when I was reunited with my friends and teachers. They pulled everything into sharp focus. And the contrast between what they represented and my lycée's oppressive brick buildings kick-started my resolve. After two weeks spent lobbying with leaders in the tempestuous world of climate change, I returned to the lycée, said goodbye to my few close friends, and left. I re-enrolled at Green School and worked double time to accelerate my graduation, so that I could propel myself toward a new mission: solving environmental threats by fixing a crippled education system (grandiose, yes, but where's the fun in humility?).

Bali's now famous Green School isn't perfect, but it does recognise one critical thing: that students are not a set of averages. Only when schools begin to reflect the bright minds within them will the education system measure up to all our dazzling advancements of the 21st century.

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2019 to help young people turn anxiety into agency. Through virtual classrooms and campaigns, the team's 2020 ambition is to activate a global network of young activists ready to inspire change from their living rooms. Clover is also a campaign strategist for @myecoresolution with @caradelevingne and @advaya.co, and serves as a trustee of @GlobalActionPlan. *Correspondence*: clover@momentum-starts-here.org