

A film for our times

The story of XP school

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Abstract

A new film explores the UK's most radical state secondary school. XP school in Doncaster, a disadvantaged area of England, is putting kindness at the heart of its school culture, and reaping outstanding student engagement, attainment, attendance and behaviour. Its approach is in marked contrast to a recent tendency in UK schools to focus on tough discipline, teaching to exams and excluding students who don't deliver academic results.

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Introduction

Just days before the pandemic took hold, back in February 2020, I finished filming at XP comprehensive school in Doncaster. Our documentary, the first in-depth look at this extraordinary school, went online in May for anyone to share and screen.¹

The aim is to use the film as an engine for education change. We hope that by showing a shining example of an alternative to robotic exam factories, other schools might begin to innovate in small ways – egged on by parents, governors and employers who like what they see on screen. The Edge Foundation, which funded our film, has produced an action toolkit to help people argue for change at grassroots.

Meanwhile, here are five reasons why we think it's a film that parents, educators and policymakers should see.

1. Compassion is at the heart of the school

The school's motto is 'Above all, compassion'. It would be hard to think of a more appropriate time, given national and world events, to nurture greater kindness in our society. UK politicians are planning to send migrants to Rwanda, and Ukraine is being devastated by the Russian invasion. Encouraging people from an early age to prioritise empathy is surely a no-brainer.

XP staff believe that if you encourage children to be kind towards each other, this actually enhances their learning. In the words of assistant principal Gemma Vayro: 'There is a clear link between the students being kind and how well they do. And the correlation is they are more mindful of each other and they are more focused on how

they can be the best person they can be’.

XP’s approach is the polar opposite of silent corridors and ‘no excuses’, sometimes known as behaviourism. This hardcore disciplinary approach originated in schools in the States and is based on the theory that students from disadvantaged backgrounds need rules and structures to make up for a lack of them in their lives outside school. XP serves a community that’s low on affluence. Yet it believes that listening to students’ stories is the way forward. Its fundamental concept is to divide conventional tutor groups of around 25 students into small groups of 12, known as crew. This allows pupils to develop deeply supportive relationships with each other. They spend more than four hours a week in crew, helping each other with schoolwork, discussing challenges in their lives, and having fun. The relationships between students and staff are equally strong. Crew creates the foundations upon which the school is built.

The school’s broader vision is to ‘create young people who are going to go out and make the world a better place’. Easy words, but much harder to pull off in practice. Chief academic officer, Andy Sprakes, says local employers remark on the particular qualities of XP students. Year 11 students are regularly mistaken for university students, such is their maturity and sense of purpose.

2. It’s an education for the 21st century

The school’s mission is to provide a curriculum that prepares students for the challenges of the future. It does this by teaching in termly, cross-curricular ‘expeditions’, driven by a ‘guiding question’ rooted in the real world. An example is ‘Should I stay or should I go?’: not just a nod to the punk music scene so beloved by XP’s founders, but a project looking at why migrants come to the UK. It allows the staff to craft a curriculum that instantly feels relevant to students and has strong connections to the local community. In this instance, students got to know local migrants and fundraised to buy them bikes because many of them couldn’t afford local transport. The students made a film about their project and held a community screening in the town’s arts centre.

Every expedition ends with a presentation of learning, allowing students to develop confidence speaking in front of their families, staff and the local community. The focus of every presentation is something concrete which the students themselves have made – whether it’s a film they’ve created, a piece of communal art, or a book to sell in the local branch of the national bookseller, Waterstones (where they fly off the shelves). Craftsmanship is another tenet of the school, echoing the ‘head, heart and hand’ approach of School 21, and, long before that, pioneers such as Bedales independent school.²

There’s smart thinking behind this. As XP’s founder, Gwyn ap Harri, explains:

If you just focus on passing exams it fails a lot of kids. They get bored, they don't have a purpose, they don't see why. They are just going to get a qualification. But if you focus on getting beautiful work and you focus on character such as courage and craftsmanship and quality, all that helps academic progress. It is intrinsically linked.

3. No one is chucked out

A fundamental principle of XP is that students are treated respectfully, whatever their background. The school is in an area of entrenched disadvantage, meaning many of the parents have missed out on a high-quality education themselves. It would be easy to take advantage of this and treat the current young generation dismissively, throwing them into detentions and throwing them out if they don't deliver results. Instead, XP has not expelled a single student in seven years.

Here's one year 10 student: 'They don't give up on that child, they like to work with them, what's the problem and why are they so upset or why are they so angry? Has something gone on at home? I feel really lucky to be kind of saved from my other school'.

The respect extends to school groupings: there are no sets. Everything is taught in mixed ability groups, and there are no opaque admissions requirements. Students get in by entering a lottery.

Although XP is a free school start-up – there's no other way to set up a new state school currently – its founders are firmly in the tradition of creating a genuine comprehensive school, which works for all students and the wider community.

Its underlying ethos is that diversity is a strength. As Andy Sprakes puts it: 'We celebrate our kids' difference ... We want a diverse culture, where people are not judged by where they are from, but for who they are'.

4. Staff love it

The XP approach gives staff huge opportunities creatively, both in designing the curriculum and delivering it. In the words of Jamie Portman, principal of XP and XP East (a second secondary school next door): 'It's just powerful work. It's why we are so in love with the work that we do. It's really tough work, it's really hard work. But ... it's just wonderful'.

The challenge is mapping the learning to the National Curriculum standards. Rather than crow-barring the GCSE content into the expeditions, they are integrated from the start. Staff spend considerable time discussing and planning each term's learning. The proof of a happy workforce? The school hasn't hired a single supply teacher since it was founded eight years ago, enabling it to save money to boot.

Almost as a by-product of its approach, the academic outcomes are impressive. In

the last set of formal exams, in 2019, 86 per cent of students gained English language GCSE compared with the national average of 70 per cent.

Perhaps most significantly, engagement during the pandemic – with no high-stakes assessment – has been in the high 90s in terms of the percentage of students taking part in remote learning. It was business as usual, because the school has always focused on the process of learning instead of teaching to the test.

5. Parents and students love it

One of the most powerful elements in our film is the interviews with parents. They may not always be highly educated themselves, but they know when their children are happy and thriving. As a result, the school is 11 times oversubscribed: something surely to focus the mind of any headteacher facing a falling roll. XP trust opened another secondary school last September in Gateshead, and it's already six times oversubscribed for the year ahead.

As one Doncaster parent exclaims: 'It is like we have won the lottery ... that is what you think every time you come. We are so lucky'. This, surely, is the biggest wake-up call for policymakers. The XP approach, which gives students both autonomy over their learning and relevance, could be just what parents, aka voters, really want (and note that these particular voters are sitting on the 'red wall').³ It chimes with a recent national survey by the Edge Foundation which reported that 92 per cent of parents want schools to develop a range of life skills, such as critical thinking, creative problem-solving and communication.⁴

As for the extraordinarily fortunate students at XP, here's one comment from a year seven girl: 'It will change your life forever'.

Madeleine Holt makes films about inspiring schools through Schools on Screen. She founded the Meet the Parents initiative in North London to encourage parents to support their local comprehensives, and helps run Rescue Our Schools on Facebook. In 2019 she was awarded the Fred and Anne Jarvis award by the National Education Union for education campaigning.

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Notes

1. *Above all compassion: the story of XP school* is available at: <https://youtu.be/MwrtCFGGUaE> Anyone can put on their own screening for free. To receive an action toolkit with tips on how you can use the film to bring about education change, contact FutureLearning@edge.co.uk

2. School 21 is another free school, set up in East London in 2012, with a focus not

just on academics but on social and emotional learning as well as making things; Bedales school in Hampshire was founded in 1893 with the motto 'Head, hand and heart'.

3. The 'red wall' is a phrase used in UK politics to describe an area of England – mainly in the North and Midlands – which has historically voted for the left of centre Labour Party.

4. Edge Foundation/YouGov survey, May 2020.