The 2024 Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture

The problem with 'fairness' and 'choice': the counterintuitive truth of poverty and education

Sammy Wright

Abstract

This is the text of the 2024 Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture, on 12 November in a House of Commons committee room, in which Sammy Wright explores issues of educational purpose, fairness and choice. He draws on his experience as a practitioner and researcher to reveal the effects on students of a system marred by deeply embedded inequalities.

Key words: purposes of education; school choice; fairness, educational inequality; social cohesion

When you speak to a builder, one's basic expectation is that at some point they have built something. When you speak to a doctor, you can be confident, unless they are particularly bad at their job, that they have made some ill people better. In both instances, one could have a career where stuff had been built, or ill people made better, and that would be a life well lived.

When you speak to a teacher, though, to expect them simply to have taught something can seem a bit thin. I noticed this as soon as I embarked on my own career in education, 23 years ago. I had a lot of conversations in a lot of bars with a lot of friends who, first of all, seemed a bit dubious that I possessed the requisite gravitas, and then, once they got their heads around me as a teacher, became very animated about how I was going to 'make a difference'.

I knew what they were getting at. I'd seen the films. Robin Williams, Julia Roberts and Michelle Pfeiffer had all shown how teachers were inspirational heroes, battling the status quo, wrenching a future out of the dead hand of the oppressive present. How teaching was a rebellion, a rescue, an act of inspiration. I wasn't immune, either; 22-year-old me was pretty pleased with myself, and quietly scornful of career paths that made less of a difference, or no difference at all.

But 46-year-old me, looking back, finds the whole thing harder to parse. More than anything, I keep circling back to that idea of making a difference.

And I think, a difference to *what*, exactly?

Making a difference, but to what?

That romantic narrative of teaching tells a story. It tells a story about a world lacking in opportunities, or mired in inequalities, or trapped in convention, and the teacher who breaks through and changes things. There are certain key figures, whether you're watching *Dead Poet's Society* or *School of Rock*. The iconoclastic teacher, of course – but also the other teacher, the one who represents the system. Sometimes they are coopted into the rebellion by the end – other times they crush it.

Schools are not like the films, of course. I know that for hundreds of thousands of teachers across the country – and for millions of kids – the experience of school is one of warmth, kindness, mild drama and significant stretches of boredom. But the stories we tell about school are revealing, just as all those breathless conversations about making a difference are.

Let's return to that phrase, 'making a difference'. A minute ago I asked 'to what?', and to me the answer is so significant. We talk about making a difference, and about heroic or villainous teachers, because we valorise challenges to the norm. We see education as heroic when it disrupts. But I would argue that what we should really be looking at is 'what is this norm we are so eager to disrupt?'. What is it that happens *without* the hero teacher, or the exceptional school – dare I say the *outstanding* school? What is the default setting of our education system? What does it actually do that we hanker so much to disrupt it? What is it *for*, if we hold such a powerful narrative of struggle against it?

When I was asked to deliver this lecture, I realised that the thing I want to articulate is simple, and it is singular, even if many other conclusions spring from it. And it is this. How we *think* about education matters. How we frame it. The stories we tell about it. It matters for teachers, because it defines what they think is possible and what isn't. It matters for employers, because it defines how they use the information schools give them. But most of all it matters for students – because the story they tell about themselves in school is one that follows them through life.

And I'm not being woolly here, by the way. I'm speaking in the heart of government and to an audience who care about policy and the big picture. The stories we tell are not peripheral to change. They are central. And those stories – the ways we think, the values we hold – are defined by the decisions made in this building. If 23 years of teaching has taught me anything, it is that *everyone* teaches to the test. The way we play football is shaped by the offside rule. The way we campaign in our elections is shaped by the logic – or illogic – of the electoral system. And the way we teach is shaped by the incentives, funding structures and accountability set in Westminster.

That's the end point of today, though. Let's begin by answering that question I posed. What is the default setting of school?

Fair transaction

It's an odd thing, but because you go to school at the start of your life, it acquires an outsize sense of solidity, a permanence and immutability. This is just what school is, and everyone does it. This has strange effects in the political sphere. A lot of discourse around schools is centred on the vague but intense adolescent memories of whoever it is doing the speaking. Some people hark back to a perfect grammar school, or a grim secondary modern, or a free-wheeling 1970s comp, or a class-ridden boarding school.

As for myself, I think I can claim to be a little more up to date. I've taught for 23 years, but more than that, I've spent the last three of those years writing a book, *Exam Nation*, in which I visited schools around the country, talked to kids and tried to get a handle on our education system. And as I went around, the question that really crystallised in my mind was a very simple one. What is school actually for?

Here's what the kids said:

> Your future. Like, so you can get money and a house, like, get a good job. So you don't have any problems like paying bills and that.
>
> So like you can get a good job and not be on the streets, or something, begging for money.

Really, what this boils down to is simple. School defines where you go and what you do as an adult. How you do in school makes you into who you will be. It's a basic transaction: do well, get good life. And, implied within that transaction, is a basic quality. Fairness.

Here's a description from an ex-student – now a Hollywood star – of a teacher who inspired him: 'She was just such a wonderful teacher. If I really just think about how good she was to me, and how much she looked after me, it was really kind of incredible; she had so much love and she was such a brilliant teacher. She could be so tough, but she was so fair, and so kind'.

And, to give a different perspective, here's a description of why a boy from the Tees valley got suspended: 'She lets four girls go to the toilet, and I'm like: this isn't fair. They're going to go and probably vape and sit down and chat, like most girls in that school do. So I just said, "I'm walking out"'.

It's not just kids who think fairness is pretty key, of course. I vividly remember the first training session I underwent as a newly fledged member of the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) in 2018 – where the late great John Hills gave us a digest of how every prime minister, of either party, for the last 30 years had started their tenure with a claim to being motivated by giving 'chances', 'choice' and 'fairness' to all. And in the years since then, I've lost count of the number of times I've heard the phrase 'equality of opportunity'. The thing is, I'm not sure we've got this one quite right. And to explain why, I'm going to start by giving a bit of a history lesson.

Many versions of school

Up to the mid-19th century, although the idea of educating the poor for their moral good was periodically pushed, no one, at any stage of British history, had suggested that schools were literally for everyone – and certainly not that they should be fair. They were exclusive by class, by wealth and by gender, and acted to train the new generation of the elite. And yet in 1870 that all changed.

In 1870, and again in increments in the next few years, the British government legislated for the compulsory schooling of every child up to the age of 10 (later 13). Why? Well, to be blunt, because the Germans did it. This is what Gladstone, the great Liberal prime minister who actually passed the bill, literally said: 'Undoubtedly, the conduct of the campaign, on the German side, has given a marked triumph to the cause of systematic popular education'.

It's worth highlighting this: far from being a scheme of simple generosity to those who couldn't pay for it, the universalisation of education was explicitly sold as a means of maintaining national strength and unity – and military power. In fact, in many ways, universal schooling was a way of stopping other, more revolutionary versions of school – from Chartists and Wesleyans – who might have a less conformist approach. The thing is, there was no getting round the fact that the provision of education for the masses was also a force for 'bettering' them, and for the lucky few, a possible escape route.

So really, there wasn't one, universal vision of school. There were many versions of school.

School could be a place of exclusivity and the conservation of power, a route to 'bettering' oneself (either by social advancement or moral enrichment), a dangerous breeding ground for radicalism, or the primary way in which we keep a tight lid on the existing social order, depending on who you were and where you lived. And with the introduction of school meals in 1906, it also became a vehicle for ensuring the welfare of the young.

The thing is, these often-contradictory ideas – school as a route to power, a site of transformation and revolution, a means of control and a provider of basic welfare needs – are still with us. But there was one further shift in our understanding of the purpose of schools and education that explains our current dilemma. And that was the introduction of the new-fangled need for school to be fair.

Ranking

As we've seen, fairness seems so fundamental to school now. And yet it had no part in the conversation at all until 1944. But the thing is that when, in the wake of the Second World War, we as a country committed to fairness in education – to the idea that anyone could (and should) have access to the very best – we just bolted on the need for fairness

in a way that ignored that history. And also ignored the ways in which fairness itself is more slippery than we think.

Let's dig into that word 'fair' for a moment.

On a really simple level, we interpret fair to mean that two things are balanced: equality, where all is the same, and equity, where there is balance and proportion. That, for example, everyone gets a fair hearing in court, irrespective of who they are (equality before the law), or that the tax rate is fair in that people pay in proportion to their income (an equitable distribution).

In educational terms, this means that everyone has access to education, but that people are rewarded according to their successes in that education. This leads to the straightforward idea that if we make schools the same, we get the first kind of fairness – and if we make exams the same, we get the second.

But it hasn't quite worked out like that.

There are two problems with fairness in school – and they compound each other.

The first can be illustrated by going back to that new 'fair' system that was set up in 1944: the tripartite model of grammar school, secondary modern, technical school. The point of this system was to sort kids into the appropriate schooling for their ability. And of the three types, grammar school was designed to work with the students most suited to an academic curriculum.

But the numbers that went to each were defined by the school places available in each area and were planned via some back of the fag packet calculations that said 20 per cent was about right for the academic cohort. So even a little basic logic tells you that the threshold for entry to a grammar school is not actually based on how academically able you are, it's based on your ranking. If there are a finite number of places it isn't everyone who can that goes, it's only the top 20 per cent.

Now, grammar schools might have largely gone – thanks in no small part to Caroline Benn herself. But the strange thing is that the system of assessment we have been left with is essentially a grammar school system. What do I mean by that? Surely we have a vast majority of comprehensive schools in the country?

Not quite. This is why the hidden, historical structures that define schools are so important. That long movement to create universal education up to the age of 13 is the antecedent to modern primary school. It encodes into the DNA of primary schools a universalist ethos, with a strong emphasis on welfare and community.

When universal education was built into the secondary sector in 1944, the secondary sector that sprang into being was in part similarly an evolution, and in part something new. The grammar schools were the evolution: essentially unchanged institutions from those that had been around for 500 years, just with no fees. The something new was the secondary moderns and technical schools. Grammar schools had that long-encoded structure of ranking and specialisation, which is why they had

O-level and A-level exams. Secondary moderns had CSEs.

And when the tide of change in the 1960s swept through the sector, it was the grammar-style exam system that prevailed. The new GCSE that was meant to merge the two approaches was skewed towards the academic model, a bias reinforced in the last round of reforms in the 2010s. So on a deep level, what we call comprehensives spring from a model of education that has academic specialisation at its heart.

Think about the difference in basic structures between universalised primary education and specialised secondary. While primary has a model of largely single-class teacher education, often without sets, certainly with all children sharing one central social experience, secondary often divides them up into different groups. Secondary asks them to make choices, to point towards individual, competing disciplinary strands. To push at academic excellence, unless they fail, in which case they can try vocational routes.

I should say, by the way, that I have a huge amount of time for academic learning. It's just that we have got ourselves into a situation where we make all children sit exams at 16 that we call 'general', and yet they are highly specialised. We make everyone do them, and yet they are of use to only some. And the guiding principle is ranking. That logic permeates our whole approach to education. It's the same with entry to elite universities, and to elite jobs. Ability isn't actually the thing that counts. It's rank.

And that's why the second problem with fairness in education compounds the first. Because even when kids attend the same school, and are by definition getting the same high-quality education, poor kids do less well than rich kids. This is true in schools, and across schools. It is true now, and it has been true for as long as we have been able to measure it.

Clark's tale

Here's a simple thing. When, during my tenure at the SMC, I initiated a research project to find the schools that had closed the attainment gap – the gap between advantage and disadvantage – the project came back with a number. 11. Only 11 schools had a consistent trend of a positive progress eight gap over three years. Of those 11, six were grammar schools with vanishingly small pupil premium numbers, three were former grammar or independent schools, and one was investigated in 2017 for high levels of off-rolling.

This truth cannot be stated often enough: *the best schools in the country are still better for rich children than poor children*. Why?

Well, at this point I'd like to tell you a story. This is the story Clark told me. Clark is a 16-year-old from the North West, someone I spoke to only a few months ago. Clark is part of that cohort we hear so much about: persistent absentees. He's high ability, but massively underperformed in his GCSEs.

> Towards the end of primary and the start of secondary, me home life was amazing, but when me younger brother was born – me and me brother have different dads – so it was like me and me stepdad. But when he was living with us the home life was terrible. He used to always argue with me mam. He would become a … a nuisance which resulted in me mainly looking after me brother. Which kept us up most nights and most mornings. It was really hard.

That was years 6, 7, 8. I think about the word 'nuisance'.

When he went to secondary, it got worse: 'I really struggled to sleep. Me mam received threats from my brother's dad – and once I heard what he'd been saying, I couldn't sleep. I was worried. Because he had a vehicle at the time as well, so he was able to … get through'.

Again, that off-kilter way of phrasing things. The careful logic of the child under threat – the idea that an adult having a vehicle rendered him dangerous, rendered him able to get through the protective bubble of home. 'And he had loads of … bad friends, I wanna say. It worried us a lot. It affected school because I would come to school but be falling asleep because I'd be tired. Then some days, I was just like, I cannot. I'd be exhausted'.

I need to clarify something. 'When you say threats,' I ask, 'you mean violent threats?'. 'Yeah'.

We sit in silence for a moment. Then I continue. 'How did you feel about your lessons at that point?'. 'Really hard. It was just, like, draining. I found it really difficult. I was also working – I was working far too much for my age at that time. It rarely gave me a chance to get homework done'.

The money he earned was essential to the family budget, and he was a carer for his younger brother at the same time. At this point, struggling with the workload and exhaustion, Clark was in school three or four days out of five. But then his girlfriend fell pregnant.

> I was shocked, absolutely shocked. I didn't know what to think, or how to actually tell anyone. I was overwhelmed. I was thinking, another thing just put on top of us. It was like managing school life, working life. I was working 20 hours a week at a bakery – Saturday, Sunday, then two nights during the week, but sometimes I'd have to cover, so it was a minimum really.

Bearing in mind that his school day was seven hours long, this gives him a minimum of a 55-hour working week at the age of 14 – not counting homework or extra shifts, and with caring responsibilities to come home to.

When he first spoke to school about the pregnancy, they talked to him about his job. He defended the amount of work he was doing.

> Me mam was struggling – always has. Then obviously with us finding out that I could be a father. But it was also learning new skills – like communication and customer service skills. So I thought it would be good to have on a CV. At that time I just believed that the out-of-school work was a bit more important – for me, and me family.

He's apologetic. 'That's not because I don't think school work's important – I do, obviously. But at that moment in time me head was just focused on – well money, to be honest'.

I ask Clark why the argument that school made, that if money was important he was better off getting qualifications than working at a bakery, didn't cut through. 'Honestly, I've got no idea. I think it's cos the work was right there and then'.

So what happened next?

> It came to Christmas time – December. I hadn't been attending school at all. My relationship with me Dad was still down the drain – he wasn't talking to us at all. I did give him calls and everything, but he never answered. My girlfriend was 11 weeks pregnant on Christmas Day. Throughout the whole day she didn't stop bleeding. And she came round to me mam's for a Christmas dinner, about 4 o'clock. It seemed to have slowed down and stopped, so I thought everything was fine. Then, around 10/11 o'clock at night, I was on the phone to the ambulance. We waited about five hours, even though it was priority. We were sitting there waiting for at least three hours. The miscarriage happened – that was it. And we didn't get out of hospital until five o'clock Boxing Day morning. And all of that resulted in me losing my job – I was supposed to be in at 7 o'clock. I rang my boss at 6 o'clock, saying I've just literally come from the hospital, told her everything that's happened, and she didn't care, said she needed me in.

He pauses. 'And that was that, really. Me job, and becoming a father, and everything'.

I want to ask a simple thing of everyone in this room. If you were 15, and that was your Christmas Day, would school be your priority?

Comforting paradigms

We have a terrible habit of simplifying complex psychological states. Of assuming that logic applies equally wherever you are. Psychologists like Daniel Kahneman have told us again and again that rationality does not have a huge role to play in decision-making sometimes. But I think we need to go further. We need to acknowledge that sometimes, when we give a version of rationality, we do so from within the comfort of our own paradigm.

Take the marshmallow test. Most of you have probably heard of this. It was a classic bit of psychological research from Walter Mischel in the 1960s. In it, five-year-olds were given a marshmallow and told that if they refrained from eating it for 15 minutes, they

would be given a second and could eat them both. They were then left alone with the marshmallow and their actions were filmed. The children were tracked in a longitudinal study over the ensuing decades, with the results finally published in the 1990s. Those who demonstrated impulse control at the age of five, and didn't eat the marshmallow, were found to have greater 'success' in the adult world – income, education and absence of addictions.

It's a seductive story for educators. It fits perfectly with a worldview that says small acts of self-denial now – following the rules, doing your homework, waiting patiently in a queue – will pay off later.

But there is a second study of the same experiment. Tyler Watts, Greg Duncan and Haonan Quan had noticed that the 90 children in Mischel's original test were all recruited from a pre-school on the campus of Stanford University, and thus came from a restricted and relatively affluent social group. So they re-ran the experiment. This time they picked 900 subjects, from a cross-section of society, and they controlled for background. The end-result was that the kids' background had a major influence on whether or not they ate the marshmallow.

Put crudely, if you grow up with less food, a marshmallow in the hand is worth two in the bush. And if you don't trust adults, then you don't believe that second one is coming anyway. It threw into question what lies behind 'impulse control' – and, indeed, whether that was actually what was being measured. This is perhaps the single most important point about disadvantage. People who are struggling with poverty or abuse or trauma do not necessarily make bad decisions. They make decisions that look bad from an outside perspective. We all, at all times, juggle priorities. And sometimes there genuinely are more important things than getting that homework done.

Choice, and who chooses

And this is where we come to the second word in my title. We've talked a lot about problems with fairness. But what about the other word: 'choice'? Choice is central to our idea of freedom. It is the core of our understanding of market-based capitalism. And over the last 30 years, successive governments have again and again talked about the idea of a diversity in schools – and to a lesser extent in qualification routes – as a fundamental driver of improvement and opportunity.

But in applying choice to compulsory education we make a fundamental category error. We simply have to ask ourselves, who is choosing? Here's a vivid illustration, from right back in the 1950s, as quoted by Peter Mandler: 'The middle class parent … expects to pay … and to have a choice of schools. He expects to exercise significant control. The working class parent does not expect to pay, nor does he expect to exercise much control'.

The expectation of paying might have changed – or at least migrated to the idea of paying for a bigger mortgage – but the choice is one made by a parent not a child, and is one conditioned by the circumstances of the life of that parent. Put simply, parental choice in essence means the circumstances of your birth define your education, which is the very definition of inherited privilege.

Now that is a provocative statement. And there are a lot of ways in which it is more complicated than that. But there is also a way in which this is exactly true. If we expect parents to navigate a complicated system on behalf of their children, we are penalising children when their parents cannot do this.

Take a really simple point: course choice at age 16. Research we did at the SMC during my tenure suggested that students from poorer backgrounds are far more likely to pick courses that have entry requirements below their qualifications – that are too easy for them, in effect – and are also more likely to pick courses leading to lower income occupations.

In addition, there are strange codes around educational choice: the codes that tell you about university quality and prestige, or what A levels are the right ones. We are in an absurd position whereby we offer courses to 16-year-olds labelled things like forensic science, or law, and yet the actual routes to being a forensic scientist or top lawyer is totally different. We rely on institutional and cultural knowledge to make these choices, and only some of our students have access to this.

But choice has further implications. The idea of choice, selection, market forces in secondary education tells a story. It tells that story we encountered in the students I asked, 'What is school for?'. It tells the story that education is a transaction. That you choose what you learn because it will get you what you want in later life. And once education is a transaction, it becomes one we can refuse.

Universal and specialist

OK. I'm going to pause to draw breath. Don't worry! We're on the home straight now! If it was a lesson I'd be testing to see who had listened, but I'll spare you, and sum up where we've got to. Story matters. And the story of teaching is often about exception: being outstanding, being different, excelling, rebelling. This raises the question: 'What is the norm?'. And that leads us to the complicated history of schools. The way in which they have been many things – places of control, of social mobility, of rebellion, and of welfare – but that the need for them to be fair is relatively recent. And the structures that make them unfair are deeply embedded. And the idea that choice can provide fairness is false because it is not the child making the choice.

The norm in schools is that, in the worlds of Michael Sandel, they overwhelmingly replicate privilege.

So where do we go from here?

The uncomfortable thing in education is that it has long been split between a focus on rigour and a focus on belonging. But in both instances we make the mistake of thinking there is just one goal of education. One version of it. In fact, there are two very different things going on in our schools, and we owe it to our children to ensure we do *both*. The first is universal. Our schools exist, or should exist, to provide the foundational entitlement that all children deserve. Literacy and numeracy, understanding of social norms, friendship and community, basic skills for living, the knowledge that we all need to make sense of the world, be it history, geography science or RE, and the activities that enrich us and teach us about humanity and our collective good: music, art, literature. All kids benefit from this, no matter their ability or future career path.

The second is specialised. Our schools also exist to direct people towards areas of specialisation that suit them, that allow them to thrive and feel successful, and have a productive life beyond school.

The problem we have is that the ramshackle development of our system has led us to a point where we teach the universal through specialised channels that favour the academically able, and the middle class. Rather than thinking, 'How do we get all children to a level of universal entitlement?', we let them compete, and allow those with the advantages to take the spoils. The things that should be owned by all become the province of the privileged.

I titled this lecture 'The problem with fairness and choice', so I should give my answer. The problem is simple. In education, choice is not just about the choice in front of you. It is about the life at your back. And fairness can never be served by a system with a cap. And in the long run, there is nothing so corrosive to social cohesion as the visible divide that can spring up in schools and then spread to the society beyond. Nothing so divisive as the sense that success is for some but not all. Nothing so conducive to resentment, anger, and the destructive currents of populist and nativist rhetoric as the sense that the system serves them but not us.

A few years ago I spoke to Joey. Joey had been excluded. He told me many things. He described school in stark terms. He said teachers 'made' him 'kick off' – because they had 'more power'. He saw the world in black and white. And, to me, it is no coincidence that someone as disempowered and disengaged from the currents of education and society as Joey was also the first person to ever tell me about Andrew Tate.

Change the norm

I started by talking about the stories we tell about schools and about teaching. And I promised that my end point would have the sharp focus needed for an audience in this building: the clear way forward that policymakers can hear, and hopefully act on. So

here are two things we should do. Neither easy. But both, in their way, would begin to change the story of education in this country so that success for our poorest children wasn't a battle against the odds.

One. To really change the norm we need to structure education in a way that is neither worked backwards from university, nor defined entirely by skills in the workplace. We need a model that allows all children the time and space to access a universal educational offer, and only then, at 15, say, should they start the specialised routes. The rallying cry for this is equality of outcome, a phrase used by Stephen Gorard when giving this lecture six years ago. Get all kids to a threshold. Only then do you need to start ranking them for specialised knowledge.

I need to make clear that this isn't a call to dumb things down, by the way, as I saw the *Daily Mail* had reported last week. It's the opposite. It's a call to say it matters to teach all kids the things that carry the core values of our society. It matters so much that it shouldn't be sabotaged by the need to get ever-higher test scores.

And it's not about tearing down the last generation of educational reform either. The knowledge-rich approach is a good thing. Cognitive science approaches have enriched teaching immeasurably. But that doesn't mean the exam and assessment structure that goes with it is perfect, or that we've got exactly the right knowledge. We need as a profession to get better at finding the common-sense middle ground which says that schools can and do have multiple purposes. This is long-term reform. Something to create cross-party consensus around and to embed on a timescale of five to 10 years.

Two, and this is long term, too, but it's also something that can start now. To tackle educational inequality is to tackle poverty. All the things schools can do pale into insignificance beside the impact of proper welfare, good housing, Sure Start centres, timely support from children's services, short waiting times for CAMHS (child and adolescent mental health services), and, most of all, the jobs and infrastructure in an area that present children with a vision of a bright future they can access without leaving all that they love and hold dear.

I'm going to finish with a bit of a contradiction, though. Schools are strange places. I set out in *Exam Nation* to try to pin them down. To describe what is really there. It seems a stupid goal, in many ways. After all, what's really there is … everything. Everyone. Every life experience you can imagine. Cheek-by-jowl in a crappy building from the 1960s. And yet, there is also something oddly elusive about them. 'School', as we talk about it, isn't as simple as a place, or the people in it. It's a kind of dance, choreographed by the rhythms and transitions of the school year, layered over by memory and expectations, in limbo between nostalgia for the past and hope for the future.

I started this lecture talking about the story school tells, and I'm going to finish with that too. Not the story of the hero teacher, or the exceptional pupil. But the story every child, academic or not, privileged or not, tells about themselves. I say them – I mean us.

Because we all did it.

As we move through the choreographed rituals of school, they help us build a narrative of who we are. *I am the person who can do these things. The person who climbed that hill. The person who passed that test.* But also: *I am the person whom no one likes. The person who cannot do it. The person who failed.*

So the final plea I would make is simple. For all the grand visions that might illuminate the halls of this building, we must never forget that education is about children. And that all of them will learn something from their experience of school, good or bad, no matter what the grades they get. School *always* makes a difference. But sometimes it can pull down as much as it builds up.

Thank you for listening.

Sammy Wright is Head of School at Southmoor Academy in Sunderland. An ex-member of the Social Mobility Commission, where he was the Lead for Schools and Higher Education, he published *Exam Nation: why our obsession with grades fails everyone – and a better way to think about school* in 2024.

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