

WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

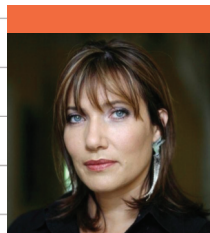
Professor Tanya Byron explains how experience of academic elitism taught her more about failure than success...

My secondary years were spent at the North London Collegiate School. We were just out of catchment for the local girls' grammar, and mum wasn't keen on the other options open to us at the time, so I duly sat the entrance exam, and got a place.

Socially, it was a brilliant time for me. I made a lot of friends – some of whom I'm still close to today – and I enjoyed being a teenager, both inside and outside the classroom. Academically, though, I hated it. It was terribly elitist, and you very quickly worked out who were deemed to be the super-clever girls, destined to be groomed for Oxbridge. I clearly wasn't one of them, and the combination of intense pressure to succeed and effective intellectual segregation between the most capable and the rest of us, was thoroughly demoralising. I remember my parents were explicitly told that I'd never be a 'high flyer'; my mum, especially, was furious (when I was made a professor in 2008 she threatened to write to the school and point out just how poor their judgement had been).

My experience of that environment has definitely shaped the way I've thought about my own children's education, and schooling generally. It's important that kids have targets and goals. But how these are decided and assessed is crucial, and they need to be individual, not arbitrarily imposed. I wish that grades were given for effort, for example, instead of children being told from an early age that they are simply not as good as their peers. I see them in clinic so often, naturally bright but presenting with low self-esteem and associated issues, just because they don't perform well in one particular kind of test. I think there are probably a lot of creative, intelligent minds being channelled far too narrowly through our education system at the moment.

In fact, I despair of the way the curriculum is going. There's such a division between policy makers and those who are actually responsible for delivering education. I have friends who are teachers, and it's obvious that morale is not great. The system is in crisis, and yet there are all these big hitters with real experience and insight, making passionate, articulate arguments that aren't being listened to: Ken Robinson (there's genius in the way he thinks); Guy Claxton; Richard Gerver; Eric Mazur and his



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PROFESSOR TANYA BYRON IS A CLINICIAN, JOURNALIST, AUTHOR AND BROADCASTER, WHO WORKS WITH AND WRITES ABOUT A VARIETY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES AS WELL AS MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES THAT AFFECT PEOPLE OF ALL AGES, AND SPECIALISES IN HELPING CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

work on flipped learning... these aren't just theorists, they're inspirational educationalists. The trouble is, it's people who went to the same kind of elitist institutions that I did (but weren't dismissed as stupid from the start), who are making the decisions. They seem to be under the impression that we all learn the same way, so what worked for them must be right for everyone, but that's just not true. Kids aren't a homogenous group – everything we know about child development confirms this.

When I think about the people I really admire – those individuals whose influence is genuinely life changing – it's often the case that they weren't particularly brilliant at school. Learning how to take risks, even if there's the potential for failure, is so important for developing young minds – yet opportunities at school for daring and creative thinking are being removed every day. I look at my children's friends, and see the sheer amount of knowledge they have to stuff in their heads, to remember and regurgitate, and I wonder, where is the critical understanding? How are they being taught to analyse and innovate, and use failure to move forwards? And in what way will this kind of approach encourage them to love learning?

It's not that I gained nothing from my own time at secondary school. The very strong, female-centric encouragement was empowering, as was the fact that the focus was on our thoughts and ideas, rather than how we looked. My parents were so

encouraging, and my background so enriched – and my sister did really well there, going on to Oxford. But the truth is, I didn't feel good about myself intellectually until university, where education was more bespoke and I was able to discover my academic passion, psychology. I like understanding why people do what they do. When I was 15, my grandmother was murdered. She was a fascinating (if occasionally somewhat difficult) woman – German Jewish, bright and intellectual – and her key motto was, 'turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones.' I tried to work my way through her loss with that, and the more I think about it now, the more I believe it captures what's missing in too many schools today. If the fundamental ideology is based on a fear of failure, then there is no way that we can be giving our young people what they need to thrive.