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Using knowledge as a route to building character and success

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The front page of the recent published London Mayor's Inquiry into London Education has a picture of a black boy steeped into a text called 'Latin Short stories'. It is symbolic of the tone of the report that unashamedly recommends that children, particularly from underachieving backgrounds need a curriculum that will challenge and stretch them.

I can relate directly with this boy, born in Brixton and growing up in south London I got my classical education from Sunday school and going to evening classes at 14. When I went to University to read English, Milton's Paradise Lost was a breeze.

I hate the liberal dumbing down, that says black boys need a rap version of Shakespeare or working-class white boys have to have everything linked to football before they can access the Curriculum. Our children stand confident and strong when they are stuffed full of knowledge. It gives you power and authority. That's why at Eton they make sure that the teacher is the fountain of knowledge.

Ultimately, London students need to leave each stage of our schooling process with what I call 'a well-stocked mind'. In these mental cellars there should be the knowledge of great vintages such as the works of Homer and Dickens. Knowledge of history that places people and events in a continuum is important. Our children need to experience the systematic development of subjects, understanding how some are underpinned by classical and biblical myths, and how they actually help to sharpen and shape the imagination.

The new London is in need of young people who can 'think outside the box', and especially be part of our growing creative and scientific industries. This does not happen when the curriculum ignores central tenets, like systematic grammar for English. We have called this report 'Going for gold' because just as the winning athlete has to spend time in the gym preparing those basic muscles before he or she can enter the race, children and young people need to be intellectually prepared to succeed in life. The new London economy is desperately awaiting young Londoners with trained imaginations.

According to the great scholar on mythology, Joseph Campbell, being brought up a Roman Catholic gave him the great advantage of knowing how myths operate on your life and how to live in terms of mythic motifs. For Campbell, the ceremonies all through the year keep you in mind of the eternal core of all that changes in time.

Too many of our young people desire a mythic framework but don't understand how to grasp one that is safe and secure. Mythology teaches you what's behind literature and the arts, it teaches you about your own life. It's great, exciting, life-nourishing subject. Mythology has a great deal to do with stages of life, the initiation ceremonies as you move from childhood to adult responsibilities, from the unmarried state into the married state. All of those rituals are mythological rites.

The process and content of schooling should be linked to rites and rituals. The stories of Biblical and Classical mythology should clearly have a central place in all elementary teaching of literature, so that students are thoroughly familiar with them, as stories, before they embark on the more systematic study of mythology that I have assumed would begin with high school. Of course there will be detractors saying that this is superstitious religion.

They need to look at how mythology has underpinned – art, architecture, literature and music of western civilization. How can our children unlock the code, without the classical keys?

The backlash against a classical education has strangely come from the left, who see it as imposed elitism. Toby Young the Executive director of West London Free School has said:

We were also told that Latin would put off any parent who wasn't white and middle class. Indeed, some critics said that was our motive for making the subject compulsory, effectively accusing us of being racists and snobs. The truth is, we want the children to study Latin because it's an essential component of a classical liberal education – something we believe all children should have access to, regardless of

background or ability. We describe our school as a “comprehensive grammar” and it’s proved a winning formula. More than 1,000 children applied for our next 120 places, making us the most over-subscribed state secondary in Hammersmith and Fulham.

Access to the classics is not about upstart proletariats trying to be toffs. This is a very British disease of class and snobbery, sadly perpetuated by the left. Who said that the music of JS Bach, the stories of Homer and the great poetry of Wordsworth should be the domain of a certain socio-economic class or race? What is clear is that the Comprehensive school project became the experimenting ground for constructivist thinking and half-baked media studies. They forget that the purpose of school was to train the imagination and build ‘character’. This continued in the grammar and some of our best Public schools. What is the basis of this education? It reminds students of how the mythic hero is linked to character building traits such as resilience, ‘pluck’, creativity, hard work and knowledge.

The issue of Knowledge at the heart of the curriculum is important. What do I mean by the word Knowledge. I use it in two ways, simple or complex facts about ourselves and the world we live. The Second knowledge is more heroic. It is what Stephen Hawkins describes as ‘Knowing the mind of God’. This is not only about applying the scientific method using some cartesian bull-doser. It must be about how to tame your instincts. This is really a definition of character building. The Romantics understood this through the application of the imagination. However that imagination needs to be trained, hence the invention of schooling or academy. It is clear that Knowledge on its own will not do. We can still have bright children who are monsters. To understand the mind of God, you have to know more than facts and calculations. You will need to undertake some kind of heroic quest.

Academic exams is one but the ritual and rites of schooling is just as important. The idea of voluntary work, service to the school, playing games against other schools, rewards for hardwork and punishment for poor behaviour and laziness. The courage of oratory in public speaking. These are all components of leadership training. A recent study showed that the majority of the UK actors in film and television went to Public school. Equally those obtaining the majority of medals in the olympics also were Public school trained. Again this does not mean that those who go to private school have better characters, it is about the ethos of the school.

Generating Genius

In 2005 I set up a charity called Generating Genius, it sought to get inner-city children to discover the mind of God through science. Successfully we managed to place 48 out of our first cohort of 50 into Russell Group Universities to undertake a science degree. We now have 600 students on our programme.

The Generating Genius method works best when our students receive a body of knowledge and are given a platform to show how much they know. This in many ways is better than ‘whiz-bang science’ or attempts to make science ‘sexy’. We also seek to re-create a university setting for our students – formal lectures, seminars, writing papers with abstracts and the application of the scientific method.

A key aspect of this standard-raising involves giving all pupils access to ‘subject knowledge’. This accumulation of knowledge is what all too often differentiates state school pupils from those educated in the independent sector.

The additionality we give to African-Caribbean students, in particular, is the idea that being knowledgeable in chemistry, physics and biology is a way of developing intellect. For African-Caribbean students often struggling with an identity crisis, we help to establish their

identities as learners. We are building a community of learners being prepared for higher education.

The programme is also an attempt to build 'intellectual resilience': the university-based tasks and challenges are driven by competition, creating a situation in which there is only one winning group or individual. Tasks are never designed to relate to students' existing interests or to be relevant to their background. We want to bring them into a newer world where they will discover new facts, new theories and new perspectives.

- The students are shown that through knowledge they can realise an identity as great learners and, eventually, scientists.
- We create a community of learners in which students are protected from negative peer group pressure – and, indeed, their own negative perceptions. The notion of a science 'club' creates a sense of belonging.
- We connect the arts and sciences while retaining the integrity of a subject-based curriculum.
- We create a five-year pathway where the clear destination is university.
- We seek to build parental support and trust.
- We create a strong partnership between schools, universities, corporates and third-sector groups.
- The programme is driven by dynamic adult leadership that can be trusted over a long period and has high expectations of the students.
- We initially target students who have the potential to do well in the sciences but are in danger of losing this focus as they get older. The interest must already be present; our job is to keep the light on.
- At every opportunity, the students present their work in public. In doing this, they also present themselves, but the primary focus is on what they have learnt.

The programme has a wonderful link between academic knowledge, adolescent identity and the building of character. We worked with the students from age 12 to 18, we had an opportunity to shape that dangerous journey from childhood to adulthood. Given that the first cohort were African Caribbean males, took on an added poignancy. Here was a group of students who according to the Department for Education (2004-2005) indicated that although 'Black Caribbean' pupils form only 1.1% of the school population they represented 7.3% of those excluded from school and were around six times more likely to be excluded than their White peers. Even in 2010/11, African Caribbean pupils were almost three times as likely to receive one or more permanent exclusions compared with all London pupils. Girls identified as 'Black Caribbean' were also particularly vulnerable to under-achievement: the school census showed that they accounted for 8.8% of excluded girls in 2004-2005 (DCSF, 2006) and were thus eight times more likely to be excluded.

PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated that the potential economic benefit of removing underachievement of Black boys and young Black men in England and Wales could amount to a staggering £808 million a year. They also found that if things continued the way they were, England and Wales would lose approximately £24 billion over the next 50 years (Based on 2006 data).

The key innovative practice is the way GG is able to be a broker for 3 important entities: The Universities, schools and industry/corporates. One of the reasons why social mobility projects fail is their lack of ability to connect the key providers. The proposal favours a partnership model to ensure that students see a pathway supported by Universities, industry and best

classroom teaching. This will be achieved mainly through GG' s unique, partnership relationships with a wide range of schools, Universities and industry.

As a pilot project, over 5 year period (2005-2010) GG worked intensively with 50 boys. The group met every summer for a residential science camp at a number of Russell Group universities. The result was fantastic - by 16 years old, 45 of the boys had scored mainly A and A* in sciences and maths and all are now at university.

When we undertook evaluations students began to care less about ethnic or class definitions of themselves and began to identify themselves as 'scientists'. Like Blake's wonderful etching of a child climbing the ladder to the moon. They had escaped the nets of nation, race, class and postcode. The world and more had truly become their oyster.

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