

From CSEs to a PhD

Karamat Iqbal *explains his relationship to lifelong learning.*

I was born in Kashmir, in the 1950s. There were very few education opportunities there. There was one primary school, serving a population of a few thousand children. It was about a half hour walk away. It had one teacher. There were two items of furniture: the teacher's chair and a blackboard. We sat on the dusty floor, writing on wooden boards known as takhtis. Each class had a Monitor, to act as a Teacher's Assistant. I was one such pupil, almost from day one. I loved learning and often came top in the exams.

After five years there I moved to the secondary school, over an hour's walk away. This had a few more teachers and a wider curriculum. This included languages other than Urdu. For the first time I encountered Arabic, Farsi and English. After two years here my parents decided to send me to England, to live with my older sister and her husband. They had concluded that I would have more opportunities in my new home. How right they were. All my achievements (there are numerous) over the 50 years that have followed came about because of that decision and their sacrifice, to part with their 12-year-old son.

In England, I attended a local Secondary Modern. This served a mainly white working-class community which was in the early stages of becoming multicultural. Many of the local children had jobs lined up where their dads and mums worked so they thought they did not need qualifications. This was true in those days, but not for long. The Kashmiri and other minority children had a similar attitude to qualifications. I was an exception.

After three years at the school, at 16, with a couple of good CSEs, I left to get a job and stand on my own two feet. I was glad the school leaving age had been raised. The extra year made all the difference for me. That was in 1974.

Three years ago, I completed my PhD, from Warwick University. Through this I have earned the right to use the title 'Dr'. As well as publishing my thesis in book form I have begun to encourage others to take similar qualifications. The following is an example of this; a comment from a Pakistani contact who I am mentoring as he moves nearer to doing his own PhD:

I am deeply inspired by you. In your work you have focused on issues that are important to me. Our last conversation, about me doing a PhD, was an illustration of you giving your time to up and coming people. I admire who you are and your writing. Seeing someone like you, with the experiences you've had and your writing . . . inspires me. I can see myself as someone who can do the same because you've done it. Thank you so much.

So, what is the story in between these stages of my life?

With the help of the school's careers officer I managed to get a job as an Admin. Trainee at a local factory. What sold this job to me was the promise of a day-release, to continue my education. This was the start of my relationship with the world of further education. Between this and my second employer, where I worked as a Youth Work Trainee, amounted to six years of post-16 study. I now had the required O and A-levels to gain entry to higher education, for my first degree. I would not have reached this point without the transformative power of FE (1), for which I shall be eternally grateful. Here, it is worth mentioning the mature student's grant I was able to access. Without this, there would have been no higher education.

The next phase of my life, relevant here, was my thirteen years as a middle manager at a post-16 community college. Alongside my role as a Deputy

Director of Equal Rights and Opportunities Management Unit, I was attracted to working in the department that provided qualifications for mature students who had left school with few or no qualifications. Utilising my own experience, I designed an Access to HE course in Youth Studies. The students were from disadvantaged backgrounds; ethnic minorities, white, single parents, those who disliked school or who the school disliked. But now all of them had a deep desire for learning and self-improvement. What they needed was another chance. FE, particularly this college, whose aim was to serve the needs of deprived communities, came to their rescue. Naturally, I saw myself in my students' life trajectories.

Then the college merged with another and the new institution had no place for me. So I took voluntary redundancy. I soon discovered that this was nothing new in our world, even though it seemed tragic personally. So, the key question I asked myself was: what was I capable of doing? It seemed quite a lot by this time, thanks to my experience and education, which by this time included a master's degree. Instead of becoming unemployed, I became self-employed. I set up a consultancy, with its own website, and began to get work, some fairly prestigious.

Soon after, I undertook a project, to research and champion the educational needs of white disadvantaged young people. With the help of the local MP, the findings were taken to Parliament (2). At such moments I invariably and proudly remembered my young self who had left school with hardly any qualifications. It was also a reminder of what difference (second chance) education can make. Later, I was to make a case for a joined-up approach (3) to the education of the young people who underachieved at school and who needed a 'cradle to grave' (4) educational strategy.:

We need to enable our early years practitioners, school staff, colleges, universities and a range of other community organisations and individuals to work together for a single goal in addressing their needs. Their work will not happen without the systemic change, and the associated resourcing.

Following the above research, I did my PhD, where my focus has been the educational underachievement of British Pakistani boys, in Birmingham (2018). This has shown that over 1,000 young people from this community leave school each year without the benchmark qualifications.

Possible response

So, reflecting on my own life's personal and professional journey, what should our further education provision look like? In short, this should be lifelong, cradle to grave. All stages and types of education - early years, schools, adult education, universities, formal and informal - should be joined-up and be accountable to their communities, whose needs the provision should be focused on. There should always be Positive Action, that is, greatest investment for those with the greatest need. Everyone should have a learning account, with a deposit of money from the government, to be used whenever, bearing in mind not everyone is able to gain access to university nor is such provision suitable for or wanted by all. There should be a duty placed on employers to provide ongoing learning opportunities for their employees.

I have experienced two redundancies. On both occasions I was able to pick myself up and not just survive but thrive. The end of job-for-life is even more a likely reality for the future generations. Melissa Benn (2018) reminds us: 'In order to get ahead or even just to survive, tomorrow's workers will have to be entrepreneurial, good communicators, globally aware, thrive in solo work . . . and skilled in teams'. She also quoted Theresa May, promising when she took office in July 2016 in these words: '*We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.*' If such promises were made good, in relation to lifelong learning, the future of our nation could indeed be bright.

Notes

1. <https://transforminglives.web.ucl.ac.uk/2020/04/24/how-my-experience-in-further-education-transformed-my-life/>
2. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090519/halltext/90519h0011.htm>
3. <https://www.tes.com/news/white-working-class-needs-minority-treatment>
4. <https://www.tes.com/news/why-penalise-teachers-who-work-poor-areas-ofsted-1>

References

- Benn, M. (2018) *Life Lessons - the Case for a National Education Service*. London: Verso.
- Iqbal, K. (2018) *British Pakistani Boys, Education and the Role of Religion - in the Land of the Trojan Horse*. London: Routledge.