# THE SIDE EFFECTS OF SCHOOL

## *Dr. Naomi Fisher*

I'm sometimes told that I have no right to talk about education, because I'm not, and have never been a teacher. I've never managed a class, nor had to balance the needs of over 30 young people with delivering the curriculum. It's true. Teachers have a very hard job, and I haven't done it.

However, what I do have is something different. I'm a clinical psychologist, and I work with families who have a child who is not fine at school. Many of those children are autistic, but not all of them. I'm on the outside of the system, but I have a window on the inside, because the stories I hear are often deeply personal, and families may not have told them to anyone else.

My job is a privilege. Each day I hear stories of people's lives, their most difficult experiences, and the way they see themselves and the world. I sit with people who are in extreme distress, and I bear witness to what has happened to them. Then I try to help.

What I offer as help is psychological therapy. It's focused on the family or the individual. I try to help people find a way forward and make changes which they want to make.

The more I worked with these families, however, the more uncomfortable I felt about this role. People would tell me about their experiences. They would tell me how distressing school was for their child, and sometimes they would tell me that it had been the same for them. They'd tell me that they felt a deep sense of shame, that everyone thought it was their fault and that they felt completely alone in what was happening to them. Many of them had children who had been distressed about school for years, and they were desperate for me to do something to help. Really, what everyone wanted was for me to do something to make the child less distressed about school, so that they would return to school and everyone could breathe a sigh of relief.

Then I'd listen to the children and hear their stories too. Sometimes those stories would involve bullying and things which had happened at school which clearly shouldn't have happened. More often, however, it wasn't about specific incidents at school. It wasn't about bullies. Something about the way schools ran bothered these children – so much so, that it was making them unable to attend. They talk about how they were prevented from doing the things they liked, and how they didn't feel safe. They talked about how they hated being told what to do all day, and how they felt like no one cared what they thought about it. They told me that they were scared of getting it wrong, or failing. Some young children told

me that they were worried that they'd never get a good job and that they felt stupid at school because they weren't good at reading. They told me that teachers wrote their names on the board when they talked in class, and they felt terrible. Teenagers told me that they hated petty rules and felt that no one really saw them for the people they were. They told me about zero-tolerance behavioural policies which meant they spent time in detention on a regular basis. They also told me that they'd been told their life would be over if they stopped going to school.

I started to think that what I was seeing wasn't about any sort of emotional dysfunction in these children. Instead, the symptoms they were reporting to me seemed to be side effects of the way the school system managed children and child behaviour. Unwanted effects of the way which we have chosen to educate our children, in the 21st century.

For we can see emotional distress in different ways. We can see it as a mental health problem, which locates the issue in the child and therefore suggests that the solution is a medical or psychological intervention. That's the dominant way in which school-related distress is seen in this country. We assume the problem is the child or their family. They are offered interventions directed at their emotions. We behave as if when a child is anxious, the emotions themselves are the problem. Our interventions are directed there.

There are other ways to see this situation. We could see distress as a result of the system around a person, an understandable reaction to the circumstances they find themselves in. If we see emotional distress as a reaction to circumstances, however, then that challenges us. It suggests that the most effective intervention would be to change the circumstances, rather than try to change their emotional reaction.

## Evidence

There's a lot of talk about evidence-based education at the moment. Evidence is important, but it's also subject to limitations and bias. If we don't ask the right questions, the evidence won't give us a meaningful answer. There's a lot to learn about the way in which evidence-based practice works from medicine, and so I'm going to use that metaphor.

When a new drug is put on the market, it must go through clinical trials beforehand. Clinical trials don't just look at the desired effects; they also look at the undesired effects that a drug has – and these are often serious. Sometimes so serious that they can mean that a drug won't make it onto the market. A drug might be an effective treatment for cancer (for example) but have other effects which make it unusable.

However, clinical trials may not pick up all the effects of a drug, and even after a drug has come to market, evidence about the unwanted effects continues to be

collected. Doctors can use an online Yellow Card system, where the effects that their patients tell them about are collated in a centralised database. In this way, sometimes unwanted effects are picked up. Sometimes this happens too late and then there is a medical scandal because people are harmed by the drugs which were meant to help them. Unwanted effects from drugs don't affect everyone in the same way, which is part of why it's important to collect ongoing data. There might be a rare but catastrophic effect, which only affects one in million, and it's unlikely that the clinical trials will pick that up before a drug is on the market.

No one is asking about the side effects of the way we educate our children. There is no Yellow Card system for people like me, psychologists who hear about the unwanted effects. No one is collating the data to ask whether in fact, there might be some rare effects which we might want to know about.

In fact, most education research doesn't look for the unwanted effects either. The outcomes measured by research studies tend to be those which schools and teachers want to see – exam results, behaviour, attendance, amount of time spent 'on-topic'. This is seen as a 'pupil outcome' or 'learning'. It's analogous to asking, in a drug trial, 'does this drug work?, – but only looking at the desired effect and therefore ignoring side effects. This approach to medicine would lead to medical scandals because the side effects of drugs can be devastating and not immediately evident. Evidence can only answer questions which the researchers have thought to ask. If we don't ask about the impact on a child's emotional well-being of a particular educational intervention, we won't know about it. If we assume that they couldn't possibly be connected, then we'll never know.

Psychologists and psychotherapists all over the country are holding information which should be fed back into the system about the way that our education system affects young people. I know I'm not the only one who feels like this. People contact me all the time to say, *I see it too.* We're doing our best to improve things for young people, but the assumption is that the problem is them and their emotions, when in fact, we could see their emotional responses as the effect of a system which isn't working for lots of children.

If we look at the whole population, there are clues that these unwanted effects exist.

We know that many young people have problems with school. More than a million young people are classed as persistent absentees, and 1.5 million are identified as having some sort of special educational need – effectively an acknowledgement that the system isn't working for them. This is increasing year on year – Gov.uk figures indicate that the numbers increased by 70,000 in 2021/2022, as compared to the year before. Then we have the inevitable results of the system. Our exam system is set up so that 30% of young people will fail. These young people finish 12 years of schooling with very little to show for it, and often

think they are stupid. Sometimes those beliefs stay with them for the rest of their life. Our mental health system is completely overwhelmed, with parents telling me that they have to wait for years to see someone in CAMHS, and that the threshold for referral is very high – essentially, some parents tell me, a young person must be actively suicidal, or they won't be referred.

The typical response to these figures is to blame young people or their families. There are calls for 100% school attendance and ever more punitive measures for those whose children can't attend. There is almost no acknowledgement that the system cannot deliver for everyone, and it isn't delivering for a significant proportion. Young people and their families are told that if they worked hard enough, they can succeed – but this can't be true for everyone. GCSE exams are not organised so that everyone can succeed. They are a ranking system. For some to succeed, others must fail.

Another common response to the mental health problems our young people are manifesting is to call for more psychologists and psychiatrists. More people like me. I'd agree that CAMHS is underfunded and that the waiting lists are a disgrace. However, we can't solve this crisis with better mental health care. That's because mental health care is never going to be the way to a healthier population. Mental health care is what is needed when things have gone really wrong; but a far more effective intervention would be to change the factors which are causing the problems. To take another example from medicine, no matter how good the oncologists get at treating lung cancer, this won't improve the rates of lung cancer in the population. It will just mean that once people get lung cancer, survival rates will improve. To reduce rates of lung cancer, we need a smoking ban and life-style changes. Health care should be there for when things have gone wrong, but that should never be a substitute for looking at (and changing) the things which cause the problems.

Having set out my stall, let's turn now to think about school, and the side effects of school. I have some clues, from the stories I hear, and I also have some ideas from psychological theories and research into what humans need to thrive and flourish.

There is a strong evidence base which indicates that for a person to be motivated to do what they do (and to engage in high-quality learning), certain conditions need to be met. These are autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1997). For a child, this effectively means that they need chances to do things which have purpose and meaning for them, they need supportive relationships, and they need the opportunity to make meaningful choices about their life and self-governance.

Schools, of course, come from a different place to this. They start with the curriculum. Their priority is to deliver this to young people as effectively as

possible. This means that their priorities are quite different to autonomy, competence and relatedness. Instead, their focus is making sure that young people learn particular things, in a particular time scale.

To this end, they take autonomy away from young people. There is a certain irony in the fact that the place where young people operate with the most autonomy in a school is usually the nursery class. In a good nursery class, children will be able to choose from a range of options. They can choose between options which adults know that children their age enjoy. Water play, painting, sand play and the home corner are classics. They will be able to go outside at will, and adults will make an effort to form a connected relationship with them. They will listen to their interests and answer their questions. Teachers will adjust what is offered to the children's interests – if a child is particularly interested in dinosaurs, the nursery might help them pursue that interest. In a good nursery, children aren't just left to get on with things, but skilled adults facilitate their learning and help them to access new experiences. They do, however, often manage their own time and manage themselves in the space. If they want to go and run around outside, then they can.

Contrast this with the situation after ten years of schooling. Now we have a class of 14-year-olds, and here there is very little choice. The teenagers are seated at desks, the lesson is delivered to them by the teacher, and any choice they have is limited to the confines of the task – they might be able to choose whether they write in blue or black ink, for example (although when I was at school, we were required to write with a fountain pen, something which caused me to constantly smudge my work as I am left-handed. The moment I left school I switched to ball point and smudging stopped being an issue). Their role is to do tasks clearly defined for them by someone else. They absolutely can't go outside, walk to a different room or often even go to the toilet when they want to. In fact, when I suggest to a teacher of teenagers that young people might benefit from more autonomy, I'm usually laughed at and told that I'm naive. 'Not my class', they guffaw. 'It would be mayhem! If I gave them the choice, they'd choose to do nothing or be disruptive. I have to keep them under strict control'.

What has happened then, between nursery and Year 9? Why could we trust those four year olds to make choices about what they learnt? Why did they not choose to do nothing or be disruptive? How come they can choose when they go to the toilet, but 14 year olds can't? In fact, we see that over those ten years from age 4 to age 14, for many young people, motivation goes down, behaviour gets worse and young people's well-being deteriorates. A recent large-scale survey on student's views (including 29, 940 students from around the world) found that young people declined in their understanding of their own learning as the advance through schools – they write 'students' confidence, skills in learning and their

sense of safety and fairness decrease as they advance through the key stages of schooling' (Cox, Duguid & Hattie, 2022). There was a particular drop between primary and secondary school.

These issues are, of course, a problem for the system. It affects young people's learning and so there are various solutions which schools have found. I see this as analogous to the way in which the side effects of a drug are often treated by doctors with another drug – sometimes leading to cascade of interventions. The first drug makes you sick so you have another drug which then makes you drowsy so then you have another drug which causes headaches…and on it goes.

In schools, the interventions are behavioural rather than medical, but they're no less significant. For example, one problem for the system is that a significant number of children do not make the progress that they need to make according to each year's syllabus. These children don't learn to read at the age expected, or find maths extremely difficult, or aren't interested in writing. The solution that that the system has found to this is to diagnose increasing numbers of children with special educational needs or disabilities. Numbers increase each year and have been done since 2015. 1.5 million pupils were identified as such in the 2021/2022 school year.

Unfortunately, there are further unwanted effects to this. This locates the problem in the children rather than the system, and it often transfers the problem to health care, where enormous numbers of children are referred for diagnoses which their families hope will be the answer to all their problems. I've worked in a neurodevelopmental clinic where families were waiting up to two years for an appointment with us. We'd see them for a day, give them the diagnosis (or not) and send them back to school with a report. Did it provide the answer they were hoping for? I don't know, but it felt like a very inefficient use of resources. A lot can go even more wrong in two years.

The SEND system also means that increasing numbers of children are being marked out as different, something which many of them do not like and describe as shaming. Their parents may spend years fighting for specialist schooling for them, because the system can't manage their needs. We know that many factors increase the likelihood of being identified as having SEND, including being a autumn-born girl (Campbell, 2021). It's likely that this indicates that being identified with SEND may sometimes just mean that a child's development is slightly behind what is expected for their year group at school – because they are immature.

Another problem which increases through the school system is that young people become less motivated to learn as they get older. The sparky 4-year-olds who never stop asking questions become teenagers who couldn't care less and who don't hand in their homework. Again, the system has found a solution, and it's to use anxiety. Most teachers don't deliberately set out to use anxiety and if you

asked them wouldn't say that is what they were doing. However, the young people I talk to tell me a different story. They say that teachers tell them that if they don't work harder at school, they'll end up under a bridge. Some have told me that teachers have told them that if they don't improve their attendance, their parents could go to prison. All of these things are designed to motivate young people – and they do that by increasing anxiety about failure.

On a lower level, anxiety is used throughout the school to persuade children to cooperate. In primary schools, 'Golden time' is a time at the end of the week when children can choose what they do – but only for those who have cooperated all week and haven't got in trouble. For those who find it hard to cooperate, this becomes a source of shame and anxiety. Other approaches which cause anxiety are certificates in assembly (anxiety for those who don't get them, and worry for those who do get them about whether they'll manage it again next time), class behavioural apps and using a public class behavioural system. I've seen schools where children's names are put in a cloud if their behaviour isn't deemed good enough, and moved to the sun or a rainbow when they have complied.

Anxiety works to change behaviour. That's why teachers use it. It's easy and efficient. However, it has side effects. It's hard to titrate. You can't get the amount exactly right to every child. Some children will worry all the time about losing their Golden Time, or losing a point in the behavioural system. Others will become preoccupied with whether their parents might end up in prison. I see children who chew their sleeves to shreds and pull their eyebrows out with anxiety.

For everyone, anxiety makes it harder to learn, and rewards shift the focus from learning because you are interested in learning because you are being made to.

The last effect I'm going to talk about is behaviour. There's a lot of discussion about what behaviour means in school. As a psychologist, I see observing behaviour as an essential part of understanding what is going on for a young person. Our behaviour reflects our inner state. When we are tense and frustrated, our behaviour reflects that. When we are curious and interested, our behaviour reflects that.

When young people are frustrated or distressed, one of the ways that they show that is through their behaviour. This is a big problem for the school system and for teachers. Behaviour often deteriorates as young people progress through school. At the same time, the amount of emotional support which a school offers usually declines. Teachers become more distant figures and have less time to get to know each young person.

The solution which many schools have found to this is strict behavioural policies. They bring in systems of rewards and punishments which are used to control every aspect of children's behaviour. Strict uniform policies which see you sent home for having the wrong socks or skirt length, behaviour policies which put you in detention for forgetting your book or talking in the corridor.

When we manage behaviour in this way, it no longer matters what the young people think. We remove even more autonomy from them, because the issue has become one of compliance. Their only choice is to comply or not.

There are some quite serious side effects to this approach, because there is growing neuroscientific evidence that young people need lots of practice in self-control. Brain development is experience dependent, and adolescence is the time when the part of our brain which specialises in self-control is developing. Complying with a strict behavioural policy out of fear isn't the same thing as self-control. Being controlled is different. The other side effect to these behaviour policies is that young people are angry and resentful. They feel controlled – and humans do not like to feel controlled.

When I talk about these effects, I'm often told that this is just how adolescent humans are, and that they must be forced to learn as otherwise they will miss out on vital skills. To which I answer, but how do we know? Most people have very little experience of what young people are like when they develop without schooling, and so they assume the worse. What if a lot of the apathy and behaviour we see in our young people is actually how they are *in the context of school?*

It's a strange fact about research into child development that it rarely looks at the impact of schooling on how young people develop. I studied a lot about social and cognitive development when I was training to be a psychologist, and school attendance was simply assumed. If the children in the study were over five, of course they would be at school. I did my own research studies with autistic children and I visited them in schools. It never occurred to me to wonder whether things might be different if I had found a group of children who weren't in school. It was only when I become a mother myself that I realised that a high proportion of autistic children are not in school, either because they are home-educated or because they have attendance difficulties.

School is like the invisible factor in child development, unspoken and assumed – but very significant. Thirty hours a week for 12 years is a huge intervention. It would be very odd if it didn't make a significant difference. Of course, typically, we assume that school must be beneficial to child development – but how would we know? School was not an evidence-based intervention. The Victorians did not do randomised control trials before making education compulsory. They didn't work out that seating children in rows and telling them what to remember was the best way to spend a childhood through research – it was convenient and cost-effective to maximise the number of children to each adult, and so that is what they did.

Now, however, we do know slightly more. An interest of mine over the last ten years has been self-directed education – or education which does not look anything like schooling. In self-directed education, the principles of that nursery classroom

continue as young people grow. They continue to be able to make choices and manage their time. Adults support and provide opportunities, but they don't compel. Self-directed education takes place at home for many, or in self-directed learning communities for others.

Research with self-directed young people shows quite a different pathway to what we see in schooled adolescents. My own research with parents found that they reported their teenagers being highly motivated to learn, often setting themselves challenging tasks. Parents told me that their adolescents were learning languages, practicing musical instruments, learning to code, studying maths and science and even (to my surprise) refining their handwriting. Many of them chose to do exams. Research studies have shown that young people who are not formally schooled frequently choose to go onto higher education and that they do not report any particular problems in doing so (Gray & Chanoff, 1986, Gray & Riley, 2013).

It's hard to visualise adolescent development when a young person isn't schooled because it's so unusual in our society. But the evidence is there. School isn't the only way to learn, and it's possible that the process of schooling, through removing agency, results in adolescents having more difficulty in learning, showing more disruptive behaviour – and not developing the skills they need to manage themselves and their own learning.

In my clinic, however, I see distress. I see adolescents who tell me that they feel powerless and can't see the point in going on. Parents tell me that they have no idea what to do because their child is so unhappy. And younger children who tell me that school feels like a cage or a prison to them.

Just like the side effects of a drug, these effects won't affect everyone. They don't have to be true for everyone in order to be true for some. Each person reacts different to their environment, and a context which is happy for one child might be intolerable for another.

I'm being called in at the end of the road. The system causes problems, which it then tries to solve. The solution causes more problems, including school refusal and distress – which then I'm asked to try and solve. It's tinkering around at the edges.

What I offer isn't enough, because there's nothing wrong with children who feel distressed in a situation which isn't right for them. I don't want to tell young people that they are wrong to feel the way they do, because they have a point. They don't have power. They don't have choices. They can't leave, even if they really want to. Schooling doesn't put flourishing at the centre of education.

For that, I think we have to change the assumptions at the core of the system. We need to stop focusing on curriculum, and stop pretending that everyone can be winners. We need to stop blaming children if they aren't learning on the schedule set by school.
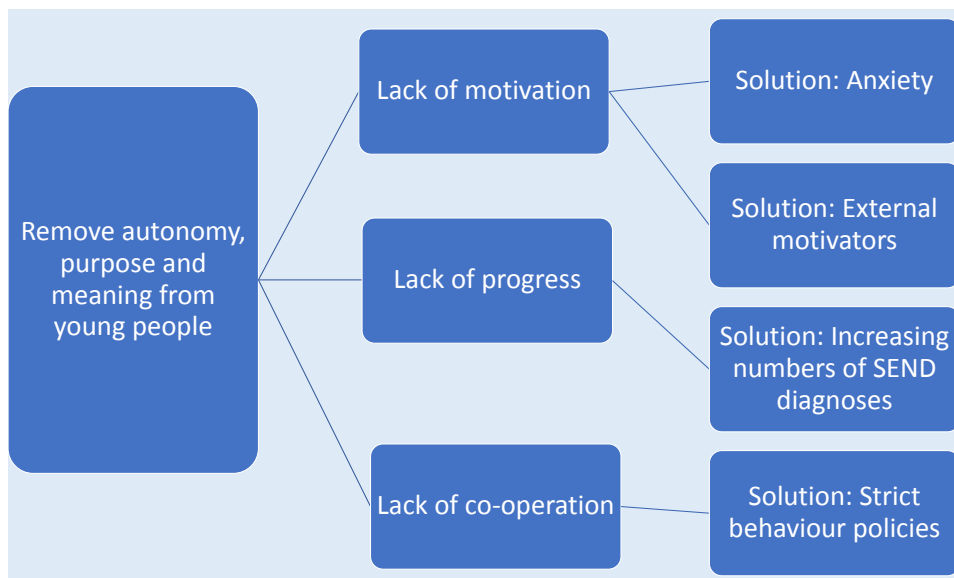
1. I'd like us to reorganise education based on these principles.
2. All Children can Learn (but they will learn at different rates and will be interested in different things).
3. Children need opportunities to practice autonomy.
4. Children need non-judgemental relationships with adults.

The way young people feel about themselves and their learning matters.

It's the last of these which has been most controversial. This seems strange to me, because a basic tenet of my profession, clinical psychology, is that the way we feel about ourselves and the world matters. This is the basis of a whole therapeutic modality, cognitive behaviour therapy. How we feel about ourselves and the world affects every aspect of our life, and we often carry things we learn about ourselves in childhood through to adult life. I've met many adults in the therapy room who still remember how humiliated they felt when they were the last one in their class to learn to read, or when a teacher told them that they were never going to amount to anything if they didn't work harder.

Yet we seem to have decided that when it comes to young people and their learning, how they feel doesn't matter. Education research studies typically assume that test results and remembering information is what is important, alongside keeping behaviour in line.

How would I change things if I could? Well, we're into the realm of thought experiments here. I think it's important to allow ourselves to ask difficult questions and to imagine how different things could be. Really, I would like us to have a

system where young people were not compelled to stay in a classroom but instead could choose to be there. This would immediately shift the emphasis from control to making that classroom an interesting and inspiring place to be. I'd like to see, just like in a good nursery, our teenagers able to go out and run around when they feel their bodies need to move, and for them to be able to move onto another activity when they had had enough.

I'd like to see autonomy, meaning and relationships form the basis of how we educate our young people. I'd like to see us asking, 'how can we help this young person learn?', rather than 'how can we make this young person attend school?'

I'd like us to make flexibility the standard, not something which can only be granted after extensive assessments have been done. I'd like us to have a system which acknowledges diversity of pathways and outcomes, and which tells young people that there are many ways to succeed. I'd like to see second chances make the norm, and third and fourth chances. I'd like to do away with the expectation that everyone does the same exams at the same age.
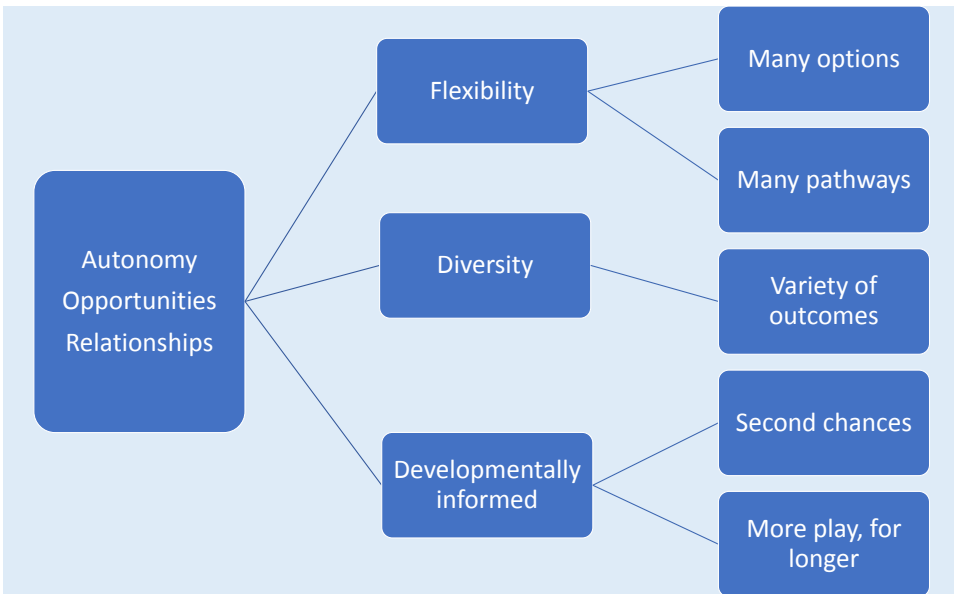
I'd also like to see a system informed by child development. Children are not small adults, and they don't learn in the same way. Making them sit still and concentrate on books is a huge effort for everyone. Why not go with what they are drawn to do at each stage in their lives? You can catch up on book work at any stage, but you really can't go back and play like a five-year-old when you're 20. Those days of whole-hearted immersive play are gone for good. I'd like to see a system which acknowledged that childhood is a special time and should not be spent pressuring children into compliance.

My hope is that if our system was based on these principles, we would see far fewer unwanted side effects. We would not need to have waiting lists years long for CAMHS, because the system itself would not be causing distress in the same way. The flexibility would mean that we could accommodate many of the children who are currently being identified as SEND and whose needs are not being met.

And my final thought experiment. What would it be like, if young people were not compelled to attend school or be in a particular classroom? What if they could leave when they wanted to? It seems impossible to imagine, but, again, it happens in good Early Years settings. Young children can get up and go somewhere else when they have had enough. There are other safe places for them to go. It does not result in societal or education breakdown.

If young people could leave a class when they wanted to, we would very quickly see what needed to change. It would be immediate feedback, which at the moment, they are not allowed to give. We'd see what they valued, and what they enjoyed. We'd almost certainly end up with a lot more play in primary schools. In secondary schools, we might end up with young people learning a wider range of things. There would be apprenticeships and workshops as well as academic

```
                                                    ┌─────────────┐
                            ┌─────────────┐         │ Many options │
                            │ Flexibility │─────────┤             │
                            │             │         └─────────────┘
                            └─────────────┘
                                                    ┌─────────────┐
                                                    │Many pathways│
┌─────────────┐                                     └─────────────┘
│  Autonomy    │            ┌─────────────┐
│Opportunities │────────────┤  Diversity  │         ┌─────────────┐
│Relationships │            │             │─────────┤  Variety of │
└─────────────┘            └─────────────┘         │  outcomes   │
                                                    └─────────────┘

                                                    ┌─────────────┐
                                                    │Second chances│
                            ┌─────────────┐         └─────────────┘
                            │Developmentally│───────
                            │  informed    │        ┌─────────────┐
                            └─────────────┘        │More play, for│
                                                    │   longer    │
                                                    └─────────────┘
```

subjects. We'd simply extend the principles of early years, so that as young people grew, they developed their skills of self-management and self-control alongside their academics. We'd value those elements of education as much as literacy and numeracy.

Many young people have checked out of their education. Some of them appear to be there, but they are going through the motions, often due to fear of what would happen if they didn't. Others have stopped coming to school altogether, not because they don't want to learn, but because they can't tolerate school. We can make many children behave and go through the motions if we put enough pressure on, but we can't control the way that they think and feel about it. All we do with compulsion is make their responses invisible. We prevent them from giving us feedback.

The voices of young people are important. I see the evidence in my clinic that what is being done to them in the name of education is damaging. At a time of neurological vulnerability, we are putting them under huge pressure – and for what? In most cases, they will forget the contents of the curriculum – my 'A' in German GCSE seems laughable now, when I can't even remember the German to ask the way to the nearest bus stop. We tell them that these exam results are crucial, but that's because the system makes them so. That could be changed and it is adults who have the power to do it. We could make childhood a time of exploration and finding purpose, setting them up for a life time of learning. We could tell them there are many opportunities to succeed, and that we'll help them find the way,

which works for them. We could tell them that exams can be taken at any age, but time to play is precious and hard to make up in later life.

For what they won't forget is how they learnt to feel about themselves when they were growing up. Those who learnt that they are stupid at school too often still believe it in adulthood. Those beliefs are an invisible effect of our education system. No one measures them. There are no league tables for school-related distress, or students' negative beliefs about themselves. We blame the students, not the system, and this should change. What we learn in childhood stays with us and our system is set up so that many young people learn that they are failures.

For that reason, it's here that I think we should be focusing our efforts to rethink education.

Dr Naomi Fisher is a clinical psychologist and mother of two young people who have never been to conventional school. She is the author of the books *Changing Our Minds: How Children Can Take Control of Their Own Learning* and *A Different Way to Learn: Neurodiversity and Self-directed Education*. In her clinical work, she specialises in trauma and autism.