TEACHING FOR REALISTS





MAKING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM WORK FOR YOU AND YOUR PUPILS



OMAR AKBAR

BLOOMSBURY

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Omar Akbar

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Chapter 1
Introduction

What this book isn't about

The UK education system is often on the receiving end of much criticism from all stakeholders, namely teachers, parents, pupils and academics. It seems that it is often the case that the politicians who dictate the system and the aforementioned stakeholders do not see eye to eye. Discussing the specifics of these grievances would take up several books, but in any case, the aim of this book is not a call for an overhaul of the system. It is not to sing the praises of the Finnish education system and suggest which parts of it we should adopt. It is not to tell you how ineffective homework is and why it should be abolished. It is not to tell you how out of date the curriculum is and how it should be revitalised. It is not to tell you how unfair exams are and why we should do away with them. It is not about the benefits of smaller class sizes and it is not about the perils of school budget cuts.

While a book analysing the above would be useful to policymakers, such a book would have no effect on the daily practice of teachers – particularly new teachers – who ultimately are bound by the system. In other words, as tempting as it may be to teach whatever you want and not give your class practice paper after practice paper in the lead-up to an exam, you simply don't have a choice. There is, however, a lot you can do to make your life easier *and* help to improve your pupils' experiences of school.

And that's where this book comes in.

What this book is about

Allow me to be absolutely direct: there are some aspects of the education system (or inevitable by-products thereof) that are at best pesky, at worst detrimental but mostly somewhere in between. In this book, you will not only learn about the nature and extent of these problems but, more importantly, you will also learn what you, as a teacher, can do to overcome or manage them effectively.

Take, for example, the curriculum. There are several issues that arise from it that adversely affect pupils, but there are many ways in which you can work around these so that you achieve the maximum benefit but stay within the boundaries of the system. In addition to this, while doing your training you probably learned very quickly that the majority of pupils you teach are nowhere near as motivated as you were when you were at school. Were you taught how to *actually* overcome pupil apathy, or were you just told to 'be positive' and reward the kids who 'do well'? Here you will learn how best to overcome this approach and have a lasting impact on your pupils.

Almost every school uses some form of behaviour policy to manage behaviour. One issue with the system is that no matter how supportive the school, the education system does not allow for a teacher's dependency on behaviour policies, and consequently their overuse is seen as a weakness. This book will teach you the many subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which good, experienced teachers stop misbehaviour dead in its tracks before doing so much as giving a child a warning.

No doubt you will have been told of the importance of building relationships with your pupils to best manage behaviour and enable academic success, but were you ever told how good teachers do this? Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between the importance that the system places on relationship-building and the guidance that the system (and therefore schools) offers on how best to do so. You'll be surprised at how much of this is in your control and the level of impact that you can make by doing the right things.

The education system has an irrational obsession with the monitoring and scrutiny of teachers. At more or less any school you teach, you will find that, in one way or another, you are always jumping through hoops, always being made to prove yourself. While there is little you can do to

oppose this significant issue (at least in terms of your daily practice), there is a lot that you can do to better manage things such as observations and book scrutinies in order that you do your best and avoid being caught out. Even something like an Ofsted inspection can be a lot more bearable if you know what you're in for and how to respond.

As well as high levels of bureaucracy, another issue that goes hand in hand with the former is that of accountability. Rightly so, teachers are accountable for their teaching and their pupils' results, but many in the edusphere feel that the levels of accountability placed on teachers are unrealistically high, adversely affecting both pupils and teachers alike. Again, while we have little say over accountability levels as classroom teachers, there is much that we can do to manage them better for ourselves and our pupils.

It is very common for new/trainee teachers to be offered high levels of support in the early years of their career. Unfortunately, the excessive demands of the system do not allow these expectations to be met, and new teachers often find that there is a disconnect between the level of support offered and the level of support available. Here you will learn the true nature of the support offered in schools, as well as how best to access it.

Finally, as it is no secret that teacher wellbeing and happiness are persistent issues in education, you will be given some less obvious guidance on how to be a happy teacher.

Why this book was written

Often, new teachers enter the profession not knowing what to expect in particular areas, and this can lead to frustration and anxiety – which, quite frankly, are avoidable. The sense of disillusionment isn't necessary, and the time wasted on trial and error could be very easily spent elsewhere.

Your teaching, your pupils' outcomes and your overall sense of job satisfaction would be much improved if you simply had a coffee with an experienced teacher and asked them what you can do to make the education system work for you.

Think of this book as exactly that.

But before we begin, let's remind ourselves why we're here.

Chapter 2
Why teaching is the best job in the world

While the focus of this book is on the obstacles in the education system and how best to overcome them, it does not take away from the fact that teaching is indeed the best job in the world. It is worth reminding yourself of this from time to time.

If you were to phone – sorry, text – some of your non-teacher friends (from now on, refer to them as 'civilians') and ask them whether the world is a better place because of what they do, how do you think they'd respond? Truth is that the overwhelming majority will either say no or will not be able to give you a firmly positive answer.

Because of you, however, the world is a better place.

We aren't superheroes (although I'm convinced that we are) but never, ever forget the level of impact that you have. Everything from the clothes you wear to the content you teach and the phrases you use – kids will remember it all. You will be walking through the vegetable (or the alcohol?) aisle of a supermarket and hear someone shout 'Sir!' or 'Miss!' They'll approach you with a big smile and tell you how they're now at university and thank you for getting them there. Kids will visit you five, ten or even 20 years after they've left and tell you how much they miss your lessons and how grateful they are for having had you as a teacher. You'll eagerly await results day and cry tears of joy when your kids open the envelope. You'll be upset when a class you've taught for years finally has to say goodbye, and when you get a two-page thank you note from the quietest kid in your Year 8 class, you will treat it in the same way you would were it a card from your niece.

We actually don't have to think too hard to remember our teachers at school. I can recall a time during a French lesson when my friend

scrunched up a piece of paper and threw it at the teacher, near missing her. She blatantly saw what happened but chose to ignore it. He thought that he'd got away with it, but the next day – you will never believe this, and God knows what would happen to a teacher if they did this in 2021 – while we were working in silence, she scrunched up a piece of paper, threw it directly at my friend, hitting him clean in the forehead, and, in her thick French accent, said, 'See? I got you back now.' From my science teacher who got me two As to my philosophy teacher who taught us what it really means to think, I remember them all.

Whether it's for your crazy sense of humour, your astounding ability to explain complex concepts or your capacity to inspire, you will be remembered. While they may not always show it directly, kids know that we are a key variable in determining their future life chances and this is why they hold us so dearly even years after they've left us. Civilians will never truly understand the feeling of being remembered, whereas much of a child's future life success will in some way be attributed to us. What a privileged position to be in!

Yes, civilians have it easier and they don't have to deal with half the amount of shit that we do, but they don't have anywhere near as much fun either. While they're trapped at their desks all day, you get to watch your kids throw water balloons at the deputy head during the school fayre and you get to partake in staff-versus-students football matches. You get to use your humour and personality to relate to people, and when kids don't stop talking, you get to stand up, make your serious face and say corny stuff like, 'Err, it's your time you're wasting.' You get to banter: when you ask your class, 'Any questions?', you get to laugh when one of them replies, 'Sir, can I go to the toilet?' You get to smile when you're super-anxious about an Ofsted inspector coming into your room and a kid says, 'Oh my God, Sir. Stop brickin' it. You're a good teacher.' I vividly remember one time when a kid was wearing a bright yellow jacket in the building and I asked her to remove it because it was 'blinding me'. Her response? 'When the light reflects off your bald head it blinds me too, but you don't hear me complaining!' Sometimes you just have to laugh along.

Every teacher has their aura. Whether we know it or not, we are constantly teaching kids how to navigate their way through life as well as academia. Psychologists tell us that we become the people we spend time with, so it follows that some of what a teacher is will ultimately form

part of what a pupil will become. Yes, teaching is a career that involves some degree of acting, but rarely does a teacher leave their deeply held values at home. I can recall complaining to my history teacher, 'Why do we have to know history? It's already happened! What can you even be with history anyway?' He replied, 'Is that what everything's about in life? What you want to be?' He could have just told me to shut up and get on with it but he chose to give me a deeper message. You get to give a deeper, lasting message that civilians will never understand the feeling of. One of my deeply held values is that the minds of young people will survive and thrive if they're encouraged to be independent in their thinking and discouraged from being swayed by the crowd, the advertising companies, the politicians, the celebrities, the… [insert as appropriate]. Above my whiteboard in big letters, it says: 'What's right is not always popular; what's popular is not always right.' What special message will you give your pupils?

As you read these pages, know that identifying problems and dealing with them is not contrary to your love of teaching. In fact, it is perfectly normal to both love and hate teaching at the same time. What will determine your belief that yours is the best job in the world, however, is how much of your mind's attention you decide to focus on the aspects that you love, while, at the same time, properly managing the aspects that you don't.

You *can* make the education system work for you and your pupils.

Good teachers do it every day.

Chapter 3
How to make the curriculum work

No doubt at some point before you decided to become a teacher, you thought about your previous teachers – the way they taught, the less obvious skills that you picked up from them, the lively discussions that took place in their lessons. You no doubt compared the way in which they taught to the way that your future self wanted to teach and imagined yourself becoming an amalgamation of them all.

The good thing is that you still have the freedom not only to get a bit crazy in the classroom, but also to contribute to the holistic development of the children just like your favourite teachers did, which is probably why you still hold them in such high esteem.

There is, however, one potentially pesky obstacle: the curriculum. But fear not – if you're clever about it, your lessons can be as engaging as some of the ones that you remember from your school days, and your pupils will thank you in decades to come for teaching them a lot more than just the prescribed content/skills. While there is a degree of wriggle room, and the way in which middle and senior leaders choose to organise and interpret the National Curriculum varies, many in education cite a number of problems with what can be generically dubbed 'the curriculum'.

The problems with the curriculum

Too narrow

One of the biggest complaints from teachers – and pupils probably think the same but don't know any better – is that the curriculum is too narrow in two areas: knowledge and skills. While the problem is the same in all key stages, it manifests itself differently in primary and secondary schools.

In secondary schools, changes to school accountability measures that have taken place within the last few years have meant that arts subjects carry less weight than English, maths, science, humanities and languages when measuring a school's success. What this has meant is that particular pupils who want to do art or music, for example, could very easily be denied this choice and instead be forced to do a subject that 'counts'.

Meanwhile in primary schools the heavy focus on English and maths in Year 6 due to the SATs exams has led to a very narrow curriculum in Year 6 in many schools. In essence, the more pressure on the school to achieve high SATs results, the less diverse the curriculum. Even science (which 'counts' in secondary schools) is often reduced to the absolute minimum, to the point that pupils who leave primary schools with satisfactory grades in English and maths still enter secondary school not knowing that the planets revolve around the sun.

The above obviously refers to the curriculum in the broader sense, i.e. which subjects are being taught, so a classroom teacher does not have much influence in this matter. However, many teachers considered the curriculum to be too narrow long before any of the changes in recent years. The reason for this is that even *within* a given subject, we are often prescribed, very specifically, exactly what to teach. This, in and of itself, is not the worst thing ever – it makes sense for all the kids in the country to be taught the same thing. The problem, however, is that while much of it is essential foundation knowledge, some of it was very blatantly decided arbitrarily by some bureaucrat at some conference somewhere, with little or no consultation with anyone who has ever taught a lesson in their life. And you have to teach it all, with almost no flexibility. Frustrating for both teachers and pupils alike.

Inaccessible

At the same time that the curriculum became narrower, it also became less accessible than it has ever been – at least in my lifetime. The then education secretary, Michael Gove, decided that the previous curriculum was too easy (it wasn't!) and in one fell swoop made changes that essentially meant that parts of A level content crept their way into GCSE, and primary school pupils were learning concepts such as fractions as early as age five. As well as teachers having to take on the