

Is education the most powerful weapon we have for changing the world?

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In 1990, at Madison Park High School, Roxbury, Nelson Mandela said that ‘education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world’¹. Changing the world requires first changing minds – and since education is so deeply linked to persuasion, it is no surprise that it is such an effective tool. It is not perfect, as there are many other factors, such as genetics and inherited traits, that can influence how we think, but it is far more effective than force, as will be shown in this essay. However, we should be cautious about this militaristic language when discussing the forces behind change; the use of ‘weapon’ implies a destructive and damaging impact, where we should be highlighting the nurturing aspects of education.

The concept of ‘changing the world’ is an incredibly wide one, and not necessarily positive, but this essay will focus on areas impacting social issues and rights. Education itself is also nebulous, but simply put, involves imparting skills and knowledge, often (although not always) onto young people. Generally, increased education leads to a net positive impact – for example, increased fiscal spending on education led to a better standard of living² in Nigeria, between 1981 and 2017.

If people’s perspectives are changed, it can have a profound impact on their behaviour. For example, a study in Japan found that exposure to positive materials about immigration made subjects more likely to support it – and more likely to take political action promoting this viewpoint³. This is also clear on a much larger level – In 2013, LGBT Americans generally felt that there was far more social acceptance of the community than there was 10 years before, attributing this change to a variety of influences, especially the presence of more LGBT public figures in media⁴. Two years after, same-sex marriage was legalised in every state, correlating strongly with this increasing acceptance across the country. It seems that when attitudes change, the world often changes with them.

A kind approach to changing minds, rather than one involving force or mandates, has been proven to be more effective in various settings. For example, the study ‘*Beneficent Persuasion: Techniques and Ethical Guidelines to Improve Patients’ Decisions*’⁵ discussed the

¹ Mandela, N. (1990, June 24). Nelson Mandela visits Madison Park HS In Roxbury in 1990. Roxbury, Massachusetts, United States of America: GBH News.

² Ogbuagu, A. R., & B., E. D. (2019). The Dynamic Correlation between Fiscal Spending on Education, Health, Consumption and Standard of Living in Nigeria. *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues*, 259-267.

³ Facchini, G., Margalit, Y., & Nakata, H. (2017). Countering Public Opposition to Immigration: The impact of information campaigns. *The Research Institute of Economy, Trade, and Industry*, 2.

⁴ Pew Research Center. (2013, June 13). A Survey of LGBT Americans. Retrieved from Pew Research Centre: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>

⁵ Swindell, J. S., McGuire, A. L., & Halpern, S. D. (2010). *Beneficent Persuasion: Techniques and Ethical Guidelines to Improve Patients’ Decisions*. *The Annals of Family Medicine*, Figures and data.

best persuasion techniques in a clinical setting. These include framing (restating the same facts in a different context), refocusing (asking a patient to consider other aspects of a situation), and even invoking feelings of regret. Swindell et al insist that promoting values important to patients can cause results that are far more beneficial to a person's long-term wellbeing than simply restricting choice. A meta-analytical study by Elizabeth Thompson Gershoff commented on the ineffectiveness of corporal punishment on children. Gershoff looked at multiple studies on the topic, and concluded that, although this technique did result in high immediate compliance, the most common long-term results are exactly the opposite of what is wanted – aggression, and criminal and antisocial behaviour⁶. Perhaps effectively changing behaviour requires not coercive and 'weaponised' approaches, but ones that are enabling and facilitating.

Studies have clearly shown that persuasion works better than force, but both of the above situations are external to the school environment – what relation does this have to education? Teaching need not be confined to the classroom; many people have an influence on a person's learning, including but not confined to parents, peers, superior, the media, and indeed teachers. For example, '*Children of Different Worlds: The Formation of Social Behaviour*' by Whiting and Edwards found that parents play an important part in the teaching of social gender roles, stating that '*the power of mothers to assign girls and boys to different settings may be the single most important factor in shaping gender-specific behaviours in childhood*'⁷. Furthermore, in the 2002 study '*Relative Contributions of Families and Peers to Children's Social Development*', Parke et al found that peer influences '*play significant roles in children's social development*', especially as children move into adolescence⁸. Of course, more traditional subjects would generally come to mind when considering education, but arguably social knowledge is just as integral to changing the world as academic knowledge.

Within the classroom, persuasion is also integral to teaching. P. Karen Murphy, a professor of Educational Psychology at the Penn State College of Education, has described persuasion as a way to '[evoke] a change in one's understanding or judgement relative to a particular idea or premise'⁹. She argued that, in teaching, one is doing exactly this, and promoted the metaphor 'Teaching is Persuasion', treating the two ideas as one and the same. It makes sense that the concepts should be inextricably linked; there is proof that a teacher's attitudes can influence both the attainment and personality of their students¹⁰, showing that the instructor-student relationship can have an impact on views and behaviour.

⁶ Gershoff, E. T. (2002). Corporal Punishment by Parents and Associated Child Behaviors and. *Psychological Bulletin*, 539-579.

⁷ Whiting, B. B., & Edwards, C. P. (1988). *Children of Different Worlds: The Formation of Social Behaviour*. Harvard University Press.

⁸ Parke, R. D., Simpkins, D. s., McDowell, D. J., Kim, M., Killian, C., Dennis, J., . . . Rah, Y. (2002). *Relative Contributions of Families and Peers to Children's Social Development*.

⁹ Murphy, P. K. (2001). Teaching as persuasion: A new metaphor for a new decade. *Theory Into Practice*, 224-227.

¹⁰ Ulug, M., Ozden, M. S., & Eryilmaz, A. (2011). The Effects of Teachers' Attitudes on Students' Personality and Performance. *ScienceDirect*, 738-742.

'Changing minds' being possible, whether through persuasion or other means, does not necessarily imply that it is always beneficial. A very extreme example of education being used in an attempt to change the world for the worse is the education system under Nazi Germany. Subjects such as 'race science' and geopolitics (which placed the 'fatherland' of Germany at the forefront) became central to the curriculum, in order to indoctrinate young people into the Nazi ideology¹¹. And it was very effective; a study by Nico Voigtländer and Hans-Joachim Voth found that Germans who had grown up under Nazi rule were two to three times more likely to hold anti-Semitic beliefs than those who had not¹². They also found that it was Nazi schooling, rather than radio or cinema propaganda, that led this extreme prejudice. Education is an extremely powerful tool in the wrong hands – but even then, the act of teaching young people is far more successful when it is handled as a persuasive act than as a weapon, no matter how destructive the consequences.

To some extent, near-uncontrollable factors can influence values and behaviours. For example, studies have shown that intelligence is heritable (in the sense that heritable means as a result of parentage, and not purely genetic), and often affected by various factors such as class, parents' attitudes to education, and even nutrition. Studies in the field of behavioural genetics have found that twins adopted into different families may well have very different IQs¹³, often corresponding to the IQ of the respective adoptive parents. This seems to show that upbringing massively impacts intelligence, insofar as IQ is an effective measure of this. Additionally, culture has a notable influence on political perspectives; sociologist Florian Znaniecki argued that culture is an organising force in human affairs, calling this theory 'culturalism'¹⁴. If we are to use solely education in our attempts to change people's minds, we are unlikely to make as much change as is desired; there are many other issues, such as the aforementioned culture and upbringing, that first need to be tackled.

Matt Ridley's book *'Nature via Nurture: Genes, Experience, and What Makes Us Human'*¹³ excellently highlights the extent to which we can influence behaviour through means such as education. He cites studies which found a high heritability of personality – such as one by Thalia Eley et. al. in the 1980s, which discovered that there is some genetic influence on children who become school bullies in Western cultures¹⁵. In fact, twin studies have found that personality and weight have very similar levels of heritability. Referring to this, Ridley notes that we do not encourage eating and exercising in dangerous amounts despite this heritability, since health can clearly be influenced by lifestyle choices – and the same goes for personality¹³. His book can be summed up by one specific quote; '*nurture*

¹¹ Education in Nazi Germany. (2020, November 9). Retrieved from Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/education/Nazi-Germany>

¹² Voigtländer, N., & Voth, H. (2015). Nazi indoctrination and anti-Semitic beliefs in Germany. *PNAS*, 7931-7936.

¹³ Ridley, M. (2011). *Nature via Nurture: Genes, Experience and What Makes Us Human*. London: Fourth Estate

¹⁴ Hałas, E. (2010). *Towards the World Culture Society: Florian Znaniecki's Culturalism*. Peter Lang

¹⁵ Eley, T. C., Lichtenstein, P., & Stevenson, J. (1999). Sex differences in the etiology of aggressive and nonaggressive antisocial behaviour: results from two twin studies. *Child Development*, 155-168.

*depends on genes, and genes need nurture*¹³. This perspective is shared by many behavioural psychologists and indicates that education can probably influence behaviour (as seen from the Japanese study with regards to attitudes to immigration) – however, behaviour can also be resistant to education, and influenced by other factors.

If education is to be used as the powerful tool that Mandela describes, this is inevitably be a long-term endeavour. Again, comparing personality and attitudes to weight, attempts in the UK tackle the rising levels of obesity take a long-term, strategic approach. Foundations are built from the ground up, with young children being taught about what constitutes a healthy diet, adults educated on how to feed themselves and their children nutritious food, and calls to display calories on menus and end buy-one-get-one-free deals on unhealthy food. Despite all these efforts, some of which (such as the prominent campaign for children, Change4Life) have been in place for over 10 years¹⁶, over 30% of adults in the UK were still clinically obese in 2018¹⁷. Yet these efforts still go on, as experts and government advisors remain of the view that they will have observable effects in the future with enough work. For example, studies have shown that said awareness campaigns about childhood obesity both effectively tackle misconceptions and educate parents¹⁸ – although again this is part of a multi-dimensional approach, with government policy and clinical intervention also being necessary.

To be the most effective tool, something does not necessarily need to be the perfect tool. Education can be used to change minds, and by extension behaviours, but it is limited to some extent by external factors such as genes and social circumstances. If we are to use education, we must not deploy it as a weapon. Instead, we must emphasise the most important aspects; kindness, choice, and above all, persuasion. P. Karen Murphy's statement rings true. 'Teaching is Persuasion', and persuasion grants us the ability to change the world, more so than anything else.

Word count: 1980

¹⁶ NHS. (n.d.). About Change4Life. Retrieved from NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/change4life/about-change4life>

¹⁷ NHS Digital. (2019, December 3). Health Survey for England 2018 [NS]. Retrieved from NHS Digital: <http://digital.nhs.uk/pubs/hse2018>

¹⁸ L., G. L., K., D. K., E., G. K., L., K., & M., J. J. (2017). Evaluation of a Childhood Obesity Awareness Campaign Targeting Head Start Families: Designed by Parents for Parents. *J Health Care Poor Underserved*, 25-33.

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