

WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

COMEDIAN SARA PASCOE KNOWS JUST HOW POWERFUL
THE INFLUENCE OF A GOOD TEACHER CAN BE...

I really, really loved primary school. I grew up in Dagenham, which people might think of as a rough area, I suppose, but I had excellent teachers and a lot of freedom. There was no uniform, so I could wear whatever I liked. I used to layer clothes; a Batman t-shirt I'd tie-dyed myself with bleach, over a skirt and luminous pink cycling shorts. The teachers would joke 'Sara got dressed in the dark again', but I only ever remember people being kind, rather than nasty.

I found secondary school more difficult. There was a uniform suddenly. It's supposed to be a 'leveller', isn't it? But your shoes, the accessories – people can spot when you don't have money, regardless. Plus, uniform is expensive and we had cheaper, off-colour versions that embarrassed me. The first secondary school I went to I was very unhappy; I was bullied a bit and didn't think I would ever be accepted. My mum worked very long hours but she took me out of school for six months while she tried to force a school in a better area to take me. It was in Upminster, much more affluent, and I seemed poor in comparison to my classmates. I told lies, wore my mum's shoes and had a slightly wrong colour green skirt.

I was ashamed but not lacking in confidence, I had been raised to... express myself. I didn't know how to be quiet, or not attract attention. In fact, quite the reverse – I did lots of drama, and I used to put on assemblies for my peers. I was very bossy and well meaning I guess. I set up a Bully-Line to support students, which no one ever used. I made the volunteers sing 'Lean on Me' in assembly – sorry, guys. I was not popular but I did enjoy learning, especially if a topic came up that inspired me; I love reading, and when I got impassioned about something, I'd go off to the library to find out more about it, and do extra work I hadn't been asked for. I found languages and



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maths more difficult than literature, but I got something out of it all. Even P.E.

The one subject that was taught badly was RE. The teacher was scared of children, essentially, so he had no control, which is something that makes the classroom an unsafe place to be for the kids who are picked on, and hopeless for learning anything. But I do remember being told about a range of faiths, and what their followers believe. So recently, when I was doing the News Quiz for Radio 4 and someone said something about faith schools, I made a comment about how at least in this country we make sure children are taught about all the different religions – which isn't the case in, say, Australia – and how I thought that was a good thing. It was just a throwaway remark, but afterwards I got a couple of grateful emails from RE teachers. I got

more interested, visited some schools, and was eventually invited by the RE Council to be a patron.

RE is so much more than the study of religions – it's about the big questions that concern us all; the ones that lead us, when we discuss them, to openness, tolerance and understanding, and help us to see more than one side of an argument. I've been in schools where the students have chosen to look at the 'No More Page 3' campaign, for example, because it's something that is a concern to them; and RE gives them a legitimate space to explore that within the curriculum. I have no religion myself, but I believe we should fight to protect the teaching of RE in schools, because without it we risk raising generations with no compassion, no understanding. And for some young people who happen to be born into a religious family, it might be one of the few chances they get to consider a choice; to learn that other people believe different things, and that's ok.

The influence of a good teacher is incredible; my sister Cheryl teaches English in Essex and I have so much respect for what she does, she changes people's lives. When I was about nine, I had a teacher called Miss Banks. She told us about jokes; she explained how some humour makes fun of vulnerable people and stereotypes, she told us a joke about an English, Irish and Scotsman and said we shouldn't laugh at other people in a cruel way. And although comedy is now my job, I try to make sure I am never making those sort of jokes, that I am never making the world worse. At the end of my year with her, Miss Banks told me I could do anything I wanted to – and I believed her. Year after year, teachers help to shape young people, who then go on to shape the world. It's the most important and commendable job.