

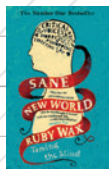
WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

RUBY WAX WASN'T A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT – BUT NOW SHE'S DETERMINED TO EDUCATE SCHOOLS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF MINDFULNESS...

Nothing particularly stands out from my high school days. It's all a bit of a blur. I *think* I was interested in comparative literature studies – but that might just be in my imagination. Or perhaps it's a belief I have because I know that's what the teenager I could have been, would have enjoyed. In reality, though, I wasn't a great student. I was having a hard time at home, and when there's chaos at home, everything is just... noise. I couldn't concentrate, so I couldn't learn. Not a thing. Now, I can learn anything (as long as I'm told about it in the right way; it has to capture my imagination) – but back then, nothing. I didn't read much. And I certainly didn't test well.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ruby Wax is an actress, comedian, author and mental health campaigner. She holds an MA from Oxford in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and her latest book, *Sane New World* (Hodder &

Stoughton, £8.99) offers science-based advice to combat depression. **SANE NEW WORLD – THE TOUR** sees Ruby take her message to venues across the UK – see rubywax.net/tour.html for details and dates.

I went to Evanston Township High School, Illinois – and yes, it was just like the movies (but with less spontaneous dancing). 6,000 people went to that school, and there were the usual tribes and hierarchies. You knew your place. And because I didn't test well, my place was in the remedial classes, sometimes with severely disabled children. I was told I was an idiot; and I believed it (in fact, I still thought I was an idiot up until two years ago). I became very rebellious; I got good at being bad. I joined gangs. I set fire to stuff. I was a hoodlum, basically.

Because of this, I was in with the wild crowd at first – I wasn't high up, though. I was more like a sort of deputy. So, if we were planning on spraying our names on stuff, I'd be the one who bought the paint. I was caught shoplifting a couple of times, but only for something like a Slinky; I was hardly master criminal material. What I really wanted, anyway, was to be popular. I made it my mission – I put all my energy into it. And right at the end, almost the last day of school, I succeeded. Edgy anarchists, for whatever reason, suddenly became cool, while blonde, housewifey types slipped out of fashion, and so I got the prom date. What can I say? I'm a

comedian; timing is everything.

So I didn't have the most impressive high school career, but I still got accepted into the University of Denver, eventually, and then Berkeley for a while (although I ran away from there – I'd become militant by then – a rebel, forever looking for a cause). It seems that people are punished for failing a lot more harshly now, and especially here in the UK.

America gets a lot wrong, but something we definitely get right, I think, is the way we give young people the freedom to study anything they like. I don't understand why the British government keeps trying to force kids down these very narrow paths, regardless of what interests them, or

where their talents are. It all seems to be about chasing a goal, rather than being interested in learning.

My main concern about today's education system, though, has to do with the lack of attention paid to young people's mental growth and wellbeing. We are learning so much about adolescent brain development at the moment – and what we know already teaches us that teenagers are incredibly vulnerable to developing mental health issues. Schools have a responsibility to be aware of this, and to give kids the tools they need to stay healthy in the mind as well as the body. We make physical exercise compulsory, so why not mental exercise? I've gone to parliament, in fact, to try and have mindfulness included on the curriculum; we test young people more than ever these days, and yet we don't give them the knowledge and skills that will help them survive it. They need to be able to recognise when their cortisol levels are rising, and learn what they can do to 'cool their brains down'.

An awareness of mindfulness might have helped me at school. We wouldn't have called it that, of course, but just sitting in a room and listening to the sound of nothing, or eating something and focusing completely on the taste – I might have been able to lose all the noise in my brain that stopped me from concentrating, at least for a while.

Sure, there will be people who raise an eyebrow when you explain the importance of regular mindfulness practice in the classroom. But it's the same people who raise an eyebrow when you suggest that, you know, sugar might just be a contributing factor to obesity; you can't do anything with those people. This is research-based stuff. There is evidence. So let's start early, and teach little kids basic things about how their mind works, while we're also starting them off on reading, writing and math. Why wouldn't we?