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# ROUNDTABLE

RAISING RESILIENCE:  
GIVING THE YOUNGER GENERATION A SPORTING CHANCE OF SUCCESS



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## RAISING RESILIENCE: GIVING THE YOUNGER GENERATION A SPORTING CHANCE OF SUCCESS

A strong skills base is the cornerstone of any commercial success. But not all youngsters excel in the traditional learning environment, with many left without sufficient aspiration, confidence and emotional intelligence to pursue personal and professional growth. Here, in a roundtable discussion hosted by North East Times alongside Newcastle Rugby Foundation and Barnard Castle School, education leaders and senior industry figures assess the current landscape, setting out a number of objectives – including harnessing the power of sport – to help youngsters thrive, regardless of their background.

By Steven Hugill | Photography by Paweł Gajek

### What is the present picture across the region's skills environment?

The Great British summer.

A time for family holidays, adventures with friends, ice cream by the seaside, cricket – and examination results.

As sure as the warmer months roll around, so too do anxious youngsters converge on school halls to pick up grade sheets distilling the multiple shades of their learning journeys into black and white finality.

But this custom, said Tony Jackson, outgoing headmaster at Teesdale-based independent education provider Barnard Castle School, has had its time.

He said: "Children are being assessed by Victorian methods that say they have to attain a certain number to access the next stage.

"They are told, at ten-years-old, that passing a test is what matters in life – but that couldn't be further away from the truth.

"These children are going to be working in a multiple-career world, half of which haven't even been invented yet, so we need to do things differently.

"We need to develop character in children from four-years-old and upwards, to increase their confidence and build empathy, communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills."

Tony found support from David Van der Velde, a programme manager at the Living Wage Foundation, which encourages employers to pay salaries and pensions compatible with the cost of living.

Calling for greater classroom freedoms, he said: "The standardisation of testing and the centralisation of the inspection regime takes away the power of teachers to be human.

"It's like specifying a member of a rugby team to make 17 passes during a game and another to make three runs; we must trust teachers to teach."

Kay Charlton, North East group senior partnership manager at the Department for Work and Pensions, agreed, urging a replottting of the careers map.

She added: "A lot of people don't understand the employer landscape in their community.

"Teachers should make children more aware of choice, and we need to encourage young people to identify what they are good at and then follow that pathway.

"That would really help change mindsets."

### How is this disconnect affecting learners' access to employment?

Businesses are nothing without people, their ideas and insights just as crucial as the cogs



Pictured, above, Tony Underwood, pioneer of Newcastle Rugby Foundation's Rugby+ Futures programme, makes a point during the roundtable discussion

Below, Mark Eadle, head professional at roundtable host venue Jesmond Dene Real Tennis Club, who provided guests with a brief history of the sport ahead of the discussion

**"We must build as employers from inside out; we must think more closely about how we support those entering the workplace to become much more adaptable and see opportunities differently"**

Lysa Morrison, LMA Training & Consultancy founder, and Newcastle Rugby Foundation Rugby+ Futures programme co-author



This article is an abridged version of the full roundtable discussion, which you can read by visiting [www.netimesmagazine.co.uk](http://www.netimesmagazine.co.uk)

that keep conveyor belts turning.

But, cautioned John Johnston, chief executive of Ashington-headquartered housing association Bernicia, the continued focus on headline attainment levels means the region's collective production line is operating below full capacity.

He said: "You can't get on a trade apprenticeship in a college without having a level four qualification in maths and English.

"That means, particularly in some of our most deprived communities, where children don't have an academic background, they are being excluded from some traditional skilled routes."

Furthermore, John warned of a vicious circle, with the confidence-sapping effect of such frameworks continuing to be exacerbated by the legacy of the coronavirus pandemic.

He said: "Employers are struggling with newcomers – the COVID-19 generation, if you will – because those people are finding general, day-to-day communication skills difficult and have equally low aspirations."

Chris Ord, who manages the Newcastle City Council-led Work and Thrive Partnership, which provides leadership and strategic direction for employment and skills priorities across the metropolitan borough, concurred.

He said: "The single biggest thing we're dealing with is a lack of confidence and associated mental health issues.

"Many young people are a long way from an apprenticeship or a job; we have to build their confidence and get them to entry-level status to create pathways to employers."

**How can education and industry better coalesce to create positive change?**

Highlighting Bernicia's apprenticeship scheme, which has nurtured more than 70 young people across the past 12 years, John called for a more proactive alliance between educators and employers.

He said: "Everyone can apply for an apprenticeship with us, and because we have good relations with colleges, they take our apprentices even if they don't have the required levels of maths and English.

"We twin track them in the first year, to provide additional support, and we do lots of events in the lead up to applications opening too, such as helping youngsters write CVs and take part in mock interviews."

Kay, who liaises with Department for Work and Pensions partners and employers to move people closer to recruitment, called for organisations to reconsider their hiring and induction processes.

She said: "A lot of young people presently don't see themselves fitting into the world of work.

"Part of that is down to the language on a job advert; if a young person can't understand it, or they can't see themselves in that organisation, then they simply won't apply.

"Furthermore, if you put a young person in an environment with experienced adults, there is a real possibility they will shy away.

"But if you give them a one-to-one situation that allows for open conversation, their skills and capabilities will come out far better."

Melanie Magee, head of Newcastle Rugby Foundation, the charitable arm of Gallagher Premiership rugby union side Newcastle Falcons, advocated greater use of technology to help youngsters navigate the employment route.



Kay Charlton, right, provides insight during the roundtable discussion at Jesmond Dene Real Tennis Club. She is watched by Lysa Morrison

Opposite page, from left to right, Melanie Magee, head of Newcastle Rugby Foundation; John Oates, who works in business development at Newcastle Rugby Foundation; and Alesh K Jose, founder of Cricketqube

**“Employers are struggling with newcomers – the COVID-19 generation, if you will – because those people are finding general, day-to-day communication skills difficult and have equally low aspirations”**

**John Johnston, Bernicia chief executive**



She said: “We’re trialling having people do their covering letter by video, and it is proving quite successful because it removes the need to write things down and fill out boxes.”

**What other measures could be adopted to further raise youngsters’ confidence and resilience while also increasing their employment potential?**

Chris, who previously held a role at the now disbanded Learning and Skills Council, which planned and funded further education in England, noted the importance of mentorship.

He said: “Having someone that can help an individual – who isn’t in education, employment or training – navigate complexities and build their confidence is such a good thing.

“It’s about providing a hook, where you don’t even talk about employment at the beginning, but build their confidence and help them on their journey, picking them up when they fall.

“Such a model, though, requires a lot of long-term investment.”

Acknowledging the financial requirements, Lysa Morrison, founder of LMA Training & Consultancy, whose extensive portfolio includes devising health, housing and social care strategies for the Welsh Government, said: “We must build as employers from inside out.

“We must think more closely about how we support those entering the workplace to become much more adaptable and see opportunities differently.

“How do we teach employees to pass on the message to apprentices to take care of themselves? How do we create an environment that encourages each other to give caring feedback?”

Carole Loader, co-founder and director of

Newcastle-based Mesma, whose software helps education and employment support providers manage quality assurance processes, agreed, citing previous moves by Mesma to bolster its team.

She said: “We went through a few years of bringing in experienced developers, but then elected to support our own apprentices.

“We used an outsourced development company to help with technical support and provided pastoral support around that.

“We were very honest, saying to our apprentices we wanted to be part of their wider journey, that we would give them confidence and help them move forward with their careers.

“And, as a result, we’ve got two really passionate individuals.”

David acknowledged the positivity of such moves, but additionally called for companies to increase financial commitments.

He added: “We have some of the highest rates of child poverty in the North East.

“And poverty is sticky; if someone grows up in child poverty, it’s much more likely their children and their grandchildren will do so too.

“Some organisations are doing great work, in terms of spending time and resource to help alleviate the impact.

“But, at the same time, they’re not paying staff a living wage, so in effect are also creating poverty.”

**How important are experiences beyond the education landscape to youngsters’ development?**

Think of the learning environment, and it doesn’t take too long to conjure images of white-walled classrooms, lines of desks and

heavy textbooks.

For many, though, such regimentation and routine is the very antithesis of their creative want.

In its stead, roundtable members highlighted the importance of cultivating relationships and experiences beyond learning providers’ gates, with Carole providing tangible evidence.

She said: “When my son was a child, he would go into the garage and pull things apart and put them back together.

“He studied an engineering apprenticeship and, in only a few years, has secured a job with a world-class Formula One team.”

**Could sport help better foster such experiences? Are there lessons from team play that could be harnessed to help boost confidence and resilience?**

Tucked away in YouTube’s vast vortex is a Pizza Hut advertisement extolling the company’s new stuffed crust range.

In it, sitting on a dressing room bench, the now late New Zealander Jonah Lomu – fresh from his four-try demolition of England in a 1995 Rugby World Cup semi-final – stares intently at an unseen television screen.

Next to him, Tony Underwood, who lined up against Lomu in that same game, asks to share the feast, a request Lomu meets with a forearm to his on-field adversary’s face in the act of allowing him to ‘smell’ his takeaway treat.

Picking himself up, injured nose and all, former Barnard Castle School pupil Tony whistles for brother – and fellow England international – Rory and their mum Annie, who bursts through the door, tackles Lomu and shares a slice with her boys.

It's all a bit of fun, but delve a little deeper and the scene carries a more serious message.

For stuffed crust, read a craving for new opportunities. For Rory and Annie, read strong support mechanisms. For Tony's wherewithal to get back to his feet, read resilience.

And today, as the pioneer of Newcastle Rugby Foundation's Rugby+ Futures programme, the former British and Irish Lions player is helping instil such hardiness into the next generation.

Co-authored by Lysa and former Olympic swimmer Chris Cook, the Electricity North East-sponsored project has already supported scores of secondary school and college youngsters across the region through interactive activities and group discussions focused on increasing emotional intelligence, self-awareness and self-belief.

"Sport is one way of building resilience because you're constantly slaving to score but very regularly don't," said former Falcons player Tony, who became a commercial airline pilot in his days after rugby.

He added: "Anything that brings people together and provides the ability for them to try things and build resilience is only a positive."

Tony was backed by Alesh K Jose, founder of Newcastle-based Cricketqube.

Harnessing the summer game's basics, the venture delivers social and physical support to people from three-years-old to 104, including a number who have special educational needs and others that suffer from Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and dementia.

And thread-like through its very being, said Northumbria University graduate Alesh, is resilience.

He said: "Some children might miss the ball when batting, or fail to bowl as they wanted to, and, after two or three goes, will walk away.

"But those who have played sports want to keep going.

"Similarly, sport plays a really important part in improving eye contact and communication skills."

Furthermore, said Alesh, sport has the power to create role models for youngsters, which Cricketqube facilitates through its family backyard classes.

Crafted from a project led by Dr Faatihah Niyi-Odumosu, of the University of West of England, and developed through sessions with Indian, Pakistani, Ghanaian, Nigerian and West Indian families, the programme is now supporting black and South Asian communities in Newcastle's West End alongside the city's council.

Alesh added: "Families are able to play together and, on some occasions, you see children teaching their parents, which is a real confidence builder.

"Then, after the cricket, there is food and a chance to chat, which allows youngsters to see parents and grandparents, the most senior people in their community, in a different light and their status as role models."

Melanie concurred, using Newcastle Rugby Foundation's team to spotlight the benefits of non-physical activities.

She added: "We have 16 staff but only four teach rugby; the rest oversee other programmes.

"We also have 50 volunteers who've never touched a rugby ball, yet they still get as much out of being part of a team and being part of a sporting family."

However, Lysa and John Oates, who works in a business development role with Newcastle Rugby Foundation, issued some caution, calling for greater equity in programme delivery and the spreading of sport's power to other mediums.

Lysa said: "While sport teaches us how to fail and work as a team, gender remains an

important caveat in the conversation.

"If we're going to use sport as a vehicle to teach emotional intelligence from a very young age, we've got to ensure it is delivered through an inclusive approach."

John added: "Sport is limited because of the number of people that can engage; it is only part of the solution.

"We have to use the ethos of sport to develop skills and confidence across a much wider area."

### **So, how can we definitively move the dial and increase confidence and resilience in youngsters?**

Reiterating his call for a refreshing of the education sector and its priorities, Tony Jackson put forward a three-pronged approach.

He said: "The buzzword is resilience, and the key way to develop that is to encourage children to fail.

"Failing comfortably is part of the learning process, but we don't have that because, from the top down, we have a culture where individuals have to reach a certain point.

"We need to look at the impact our education system delivers, change enterprise's mindset about attainment levels and tap into our business network to increase support."

Tony Underwood added: "A character-led education is so important.

"It's a superpower, and exactly what chief executives want and need to see in people.

"If we give youngsters the aspiration to believe, to have confidence and to understand what relationship building can do, we will supercharge them to do some incredible things."



**Pioneered by Newcastle Falcons ambassador Tony Underwood and co-authored by acclaimed coach Lysa Morrison alongside former double Olympian Chris Cook, the Futures programme is an innovative new emotional intelligence education initiative delivered in the community by Newcastle Rugby Foundation.**

**Like-minded organisations keen to help drive the project forward should contact Melanie Magee, head of foundation, by emailing [melanie.magee@newcastlefalcons.co.uk](mailto:melanie.magee@newcastlefalcons.co.uk) or calling 07764 933310.**