

# Addressing Educational Inequality by Promoting the Love of Learning

**Richard McLauchlan**  
*Co-Founder, Light Up Learning*

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## **Abstract**

*This field report provides an overview of the Scottish educational charity Light Up Learning (LUL). It delineates the ways in which LUL's focus on developing a love of learning in youth can positively address some of the central challenges associated with poverty-related educational inequality. The report also provides practitioners with ideas, tools and recommendations for programs that similarly want to move the focus of education away from purely economic considerations—the root of Scotland's exam-obsessed culture—towards a more expansive sense of human flourishing.*

**Keywords:** interest-driven learning, interest-related learning, mentoring, disengagement, poverty

**Light Up Learning: An Introduction**

Light Up Learning (LUL) is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation providing one-to-one mentoring for youth aged 13 to 18 years across Edinburgh and the surrounding Lothians. We are dedicated to igniting a love of learning in young people and transforming the nature of education in Scotland. Amidst a range of national and local mentoring programs, LUL is unique for its focus on the love of learning for its own sake. We aim to address issues of unequal access to education and disengagement in the classroom by creating low-stress, supportive, and playful learning environments for youth who have experienced disadvantage. The program instantiates what is typically considered interest-driven or interest-related learning (Azevedo, 2011; Barron, 2006), in that we encourage students to pursue their own interests and curiosities and place them in charge of their own learning. We help them develop the resources, skills, and contacts they need to achieve their potential.

Our students are drawn from geographical areas that fall within what are called the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation areas 1-3 and/or are eligible for the Scottish Government's Free School Meals program. Their names are put forward by their school's "guidance teachers," who oversee the social and academic welfare of their students, but participation is entirely voluntary. Most students are identified as disengaging from education or at risk of doing so. Our mentors are chosen based on their passion for learning and ability to communicate with young people. Sometimes they are university students and sometimes they have other part-time jobs. Mentors report to a Head of Mentoring who oversees and supports their work.

Students and mentors meet once a week during the school day. Sessions are 50 minutes long and take place on school premises, with field trip opportunities. Each student-mentor pair researches and develops projects around topics that fire the student's imagination, from Anime to Zoology. We see learning as an opportunity to explore existing passions, to discover new ones, and to build key skills in the process of each. To us, a successful relationship with learning is one that leaves a student curious, passionate, confident, self-aware, and eager to learn beyond the walls of the classroom.

The program was founded in 2015 by two recent graduates of Cambridge University, Richard McLauchlan and Will Ferguson. Richard's own educational experiences had taught him the power of connecting learning with topics of intrinsic interest but also the rarity of this, while Will's privileged upbringing and costly education inculcated a strong sense of the injustices within society and the need for redressing the imbalance. Their concerns united to create LUL's distinctive brand of mentoring.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

LUL was founded with the intention of promoting human dignity, improving educational outcomes for youth experiencing disadvantage, and challenging a Scottish educational system that is fundamentally determined by market forces and thus places an excessive emphasis on examinations, "attainment" and

“positive destinations.” There are a number of bodies of scholarship within education and psychology which advance similar objectives to LUL. The following two are of particular note: 1) Connected Learning in the United States (Ito et al., 2013), which is learning that “connects personal interests, supportive relationships, and academic, civic and career opportunity” (Ito et al., 2013, p. 4) and 2) youth-adult partnership literature (Halpern, 2005; Zeldin, Christens & Powers, 2013), which emphasizes the importance of the intergenerational dynamic in youth learning. There are resonances with LUL in both of these approaches to learning and youth development, yet LUL is distinct in several ways. First, LUL youth-adult sessions are almost infinite in scope, insofar as they can be shaped by any interest that a young person wishes to pursue, and pursued through any combination of means. We also prioritize one-on-one time in a way that is not common within the boundaries of the typical school day. This is principally an equity issue. Where young people growing up in deprivation are so often cut off from the advantages afforded by attentive and financially secure parents—additional support, resources to pursue interests, the smaller class sizes of private schools—LUL makes one-on-one sessions the primary mode of interaction. This is a way of addressing what John Goldthorpe has called the “inequality of *condition*—the inequality in resources of various kinds—that exists among families with different locations within the class structure” (2016, p. 107). Moreover, because our support is entirely embedded in the school day, no extra time commitment from the participating youth is needed. For those with engagement issues or anxiety troubles, and importantly, for those who need to work for money or care for family members outside of school time, this feature of LUL is of critical importance and encourages increased access to participation.

Perhaps what sets LUL most apart from the aforementioned bodies of work is its emphasis on learning for its own sake. Learning, in most educational theory and practice, is a vehicle for something else, and from our vantage point, thereby loses its primacy. LUL not only wants to reinforce the well-documented effects of learning on personal wellbeing (Feinstein, Vorhaus & Sabates, 2008; Hammond, 2004); but more fundamentally, we want to honor what both Plato and Aristotle knew long ago: that it is vital for human beings to satisfy their deep inbuilt urge to know. This is not to ignore economic considerations. We believe that our focus on the love of learning—and therefore human flourishing in the present moment—will in fact entail the positive enhancement of young people’s capacities to enter the world of work and to do well within it.

### **Description of Activities and Program Design**

LUL concentrates first and foremost on developing trusting relationships between mentors and students. This takes time, so mentors commit to seeing their students until they leave school, though students may leave the program earlier if they wish. The first year of a mentor-mentee relationship is noted for its lack of emphasis on “producing” something; building trust and respect are viewed as far more valuable. Aligned with research from the contemporary fields of positive youth development (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Zeldin et al., 2013) and the learning sciences (see for example DiGiacomo & Gutiérrez,

2015; DiGiacomo, 2020; Vakil, McKinney de Royston, Suad Nasir, & Kirshner, 2016) we believe this emphasis on healthy relationships is the basis upon which good learning happens. Conversations about students' lives are common, first names are always used, and mentors wear casual clothes. Thus, the usual signifiers of power distinctions are likely to break down. One challenge associated with this is the fine line this can create within a student's mind between their mentor and a therapist figure or a friend. Mentors draw their boundaries by clearly stating, regularly if necessary, their role as learning guides and by keeping up-to-date and in touch with the school's network of resources and support for those struggling with personal issues. Personal emails and phone numbers are never shared over the course of the program.

Secondly, we emphasize student autonomy and freedom as a way of shifting the usual school power dynamics. Instead of being passively taught a subject with little immediate relevance to their life, students not only decide what to study in their LUL sessions but also learn *with* rather than *from* their mentor; and, often the student actually teaches their mentor about the thing in which the student is interested. A sense of student empowerment is critical to our success. Mentors' practices vary as they seek to ensure this, but some choose to give their students 10-20 minutes of personal research time, and then discuss their findings together for the remainder of the session. Some will make sure that the school-owned iPads, which are often used in sessions, are in the student's hands and not theirs. All mentors will begin each session by checking where student interest is based that day and how the student wants to pursue that interest. If a student expresses a desire to research something different from the previous week(s), then the mentor will tend to accept this and shift the session focus to the new topic. In this way, impact may be less tangible, which can present another challenge, particularly for new mentors who are accustomed to measuring success by production. Gathering student, parent and teacher feedback is vital, not only for funders, but to reassure new mentors that they are making a difference.

Every mentor consciously foregrounds and honors student expertise on an issue. Mentors will frequently say such things as, "Tell me more about that" or "Have I understood this right?" As students build a sense that *they* are repositories of knowledge, a new sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, and confidence appears to emerge. LUL mentors are simply guides, there to inspire and to challenge, and to help with the skills necessary for good learning (e.g., how to check the accuracy of a Wikipedia fact or how to use the school library).

Mentors will also instill a sense of student choice by giving students the option of *where* to have their session within the school (if this is possible), seeking to put students in an environment in which they are comfortable. They will also honor the learning preferences of each individual student. For example, it became clear that one student was a kinesthetic learner. Having determined to work on an essay together, the mentor and the student placed a very large sheet of paper on the floor with the overall structure of the essay on it and used smaller sheets of different colors to represent subsections of the essay. This

meant the student had to move around the room placing subsections in their appropriate area. The flow of the essay thereby came alive for the student and a sense of structure, with which he had previously struggled, “clicked” for him.

Mentors also provide links with people who share a student’s passion, but who may be further down the road. A student interested in AI, for example, met with a friend of his mentor’s who had a specialization in that topic; a student who wanted to be a doctor was in email exchange with her mentor’s friend who was a cardiologist in Glasgow. Such connections are common markers of privilege. LUL seeks to make good connections commonplace for all those who participate.

Trips to areas outside the immediate school vicinity are also associated with privilege. LUL challenges this, too, by offering every student field trip opportunities. For example, one student who liked anatomy went with his mentor to the Surgeons’ Hall Museum in Edinburgh. Another who was thinking about studying architecture designed her own architectural tour of Edinburgh, based on online research in her LUL sessions, and then she and her mentor went on the actual tour. She explained the different architectural styles to her mentor as they passed each building.

### **Examining Impact**

LUL draws on surveys, parent feedback sessions, student school reports, and mentor-teacher conversations to gather evidence of impact. Positive feedback from students, parents and teachers has been continuous since the program started in 2015. After only two school terms, the head teacher of Lasswade High School could say:

*This has been a fantastic programme and initiative, and I can honestly say that, in well over 10 years of Senior Leadership, I can’t recall as positive feedback about this work as any other that I have been involved with.*

It was not long before the school was partly funding our work, and other funding bodies and charitable trusts followed suit.

Intensive field work by one researcher in 2016 demonstrated that LUL had created an environment within a school setting where youth felt both free and supported to learn by deeply and widely pursuing their interests. She showed that we were able to do this “by employing the pedagogic moves of continually foregrounding youths’ interests, honoring youth expertise, and making space for youths’ ideas” (DiGiacomo, 2020, p. 68). Our youth, parental and teacher surveys have continued to demonstrate LUL’s ability to raise confidence, aspirations, and perspectives on learning. As one parent commented: “I have noticed a big change in my son since starting LUL. He has become more outgoing and has more confidence.” A LUL student observed: “LUL really helps me to open up and talk out and shows me if I wanna do something and make it public and see-able then I can if I try.” Another wrote: “I like going to LUL as I

get to do tasks about the things I like.” One teacher viewed a specific case of impact thus:

*LUL has given Mary (a student<sup>1</sup>) an opportunity to build their confidence and skills on a 1:1 basis, meaning they are able to recognize and develop in areas they are most interested in. Having a mentor they trust, respect and enjoy working with is key for Mary’s success and is something they value beyond a lot of other things in life.*

The close relationships that mentors and students build allows for moments of significant breakthrough, as the following story by one LUL mentor demonstrates:

*Damien’s low self-efficacy was hard to shift... After failing all his prelims we had an honest discussion about what happened... he just didn’t believe he could achieve, and thought anyone telling him otherwise was lying.... I came up with the idea for us to watch a TEDtalks video. This video featured a blind man discussing his experiences of life from his perspective, a blind one. His entire experience of life was a reality created in his own mind, one which he believed to be true. Damien stopped the video and said, ‘So I’m creating a reality for myself which I believe to be true.’*

*This was an important moment for Damien. He was intelligent enough (as I had suspected) to connect the parallel between the blind man’s constructed reality and his own. We had a discussion around his perceived reality versus the potential everyone else could see in him. I asked him to think things over during the imminent holiday period.... We also discussed other situations where he limited himself or created a certain reality and then surpassed it. He was now also considering evidence that his beliefs could be wrong in certain situations, evidence that he had previously dismissed because it didn’t uphold his low self-efficacy belief. I feel it was a real moment of realization for this pupil that just maybe, he might have this potential others see in him.*

LUL can also make clear shifts in students’ futures too. One girl, for instance, gained a competitive scholarship to study Mandarin at a Chinese university for a year, before commencing a university degree in psychology back in Scotland. She and the school attributed much of this success to her LUL sessions, which had helped her overcome some of her struggles with anxiety, increased her confidence and her ability to articulate her beliefs. The student put it this way:

*LUL made a huge difference to my school experience because it showed me that learning can be fun and it isn’t just about things you’re forced to learn at school. By taking me out of the typical classroom environment that I had associated learning with, it gave me a break from just sitting*

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms for participating students have been used throughout this Field Report.

*and copying stuff off a board and gave me the chance to use the school resources for something I found interesting and wanted to learn. LUL has made me realise that my opinion is valid and that there are people that want to hear it. It's also helped me with my anxiety because by having someone to listen and shows that they care, it has helped me see the better parts within myself and when I forget these parts then LUL is something I can look back on to remind me.*

Such a response verifies the central proposition undergirding LUL: that the promotion of the love of learning, within the context of a trusting one-to-one relationship, is intimately linked to a broader flourishing of humanity.

### **Moving Forward**

By the spring of 2021 LUL will have established partnerships with five high schools in some of the most deprived areas of Edinburgh and the Lothians region. We will be working with nearly 60 young people and have a team of six mentors.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an organizational shift that proved to be deeply beneficial. We instigated "DigiLUL" and transferred our sessions and resources online in a safe and secure manner, and maintained sessions with 19 out of 33 students across a period of time that has been marked nationally for the lack of support received by youth in lower socio-economic circumstances. Our digital offering is now ready for immediate instigation if circumstances should require it again, and we have a set-up that can now be used across vacation periods when schools are closed and students are often most in need of support. We have trialed online group work over the 2020 summer vacation with positive results and will build on this in 2021. We have also instigated a Youth Forum at one partnership school to champion the voice of young people and will roll this out across our schools.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Finally, in order to support other practitioners who may wish to establish or adapt their own interest-driven learning projects, there are a handful of practical considerations that ought to be borne in mind. It is important that mentors for interest-driven learning are chosen on far more than academic ability. Their capacity to connect with young people is crucial and we would recommend that, as part of the interview process, candidates meet with youth and that the young people's response to them is sought afterwards. Mentors should also make the most of their own networks and forge connections—in person, ideally—between their students and those within their networks as much as possible. Similarly, field trips ought to be emphasized as they can make a profound impression and bring learning to life in an unparalleled way.

The LUL method tends towards an unstructured approach as interests can shift rapidly. This ought to be balanced with appropriate framing of the learning taking place. A well-structured 50-minute session might therefore look as follows:

- Informal catch-up about each other's past week (5 min)
- Discussion on what the student wants out of the session (5 min)
- Independent student research on topic chosen for study (15 min)
- Mentor-student discussion on findings of independent student research (15 min)
- Joint consideration of next session (5 min)
- Final reflection on whether session expectations have been met; reasons for effectiveness or ineffectiveness of session; and, linking learning to other school or life experiences (5 min)

A mentor's regard for student interest, expertise, and socio-economic condition should not hinder a critical challenge to elementary thinking—i.e., thinking that either re-hashes prior thinking or uncritically regurgitates the views of others. Mentors should be encouraged to push their students beyond their range of knowledge and to bring further nuance to the knowledge they already have. Mentors should not, however, think they have to know everything about a subject which interests a student. Their own lack of knowledge should drive their desire to learn with the student and remind the student that the power dynamic is one of mutual respect and equity.

To break with the prevailing utilitarian perspective on learning and education is no easy feat, but by following some of the basic insights in this report there is no reason why the first steps towards a fuller realization of their potential cannot be made. In so doing, it will be possible to address a number of fundamental educational inequalities that exist across our societies.

**Richard McLauchlan** is the co-founder of *Light Up Learning*. Educated at the universities of St. Andrews and Cambridge, he now works as a writer and continues to lead LUL's educational policy. In 2016, he published a book on the poetry of R. S. Thomas entitled *Saturday's Silence* and, in 2020, he collaborated with John Campbell OBE on the highly acclaimed biography, *Haldane: The Forgotten Statesman Who Shaped Modern Britain, a study of Britain's leading Edwardian educationist, Richard Burdon Haldane*.

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