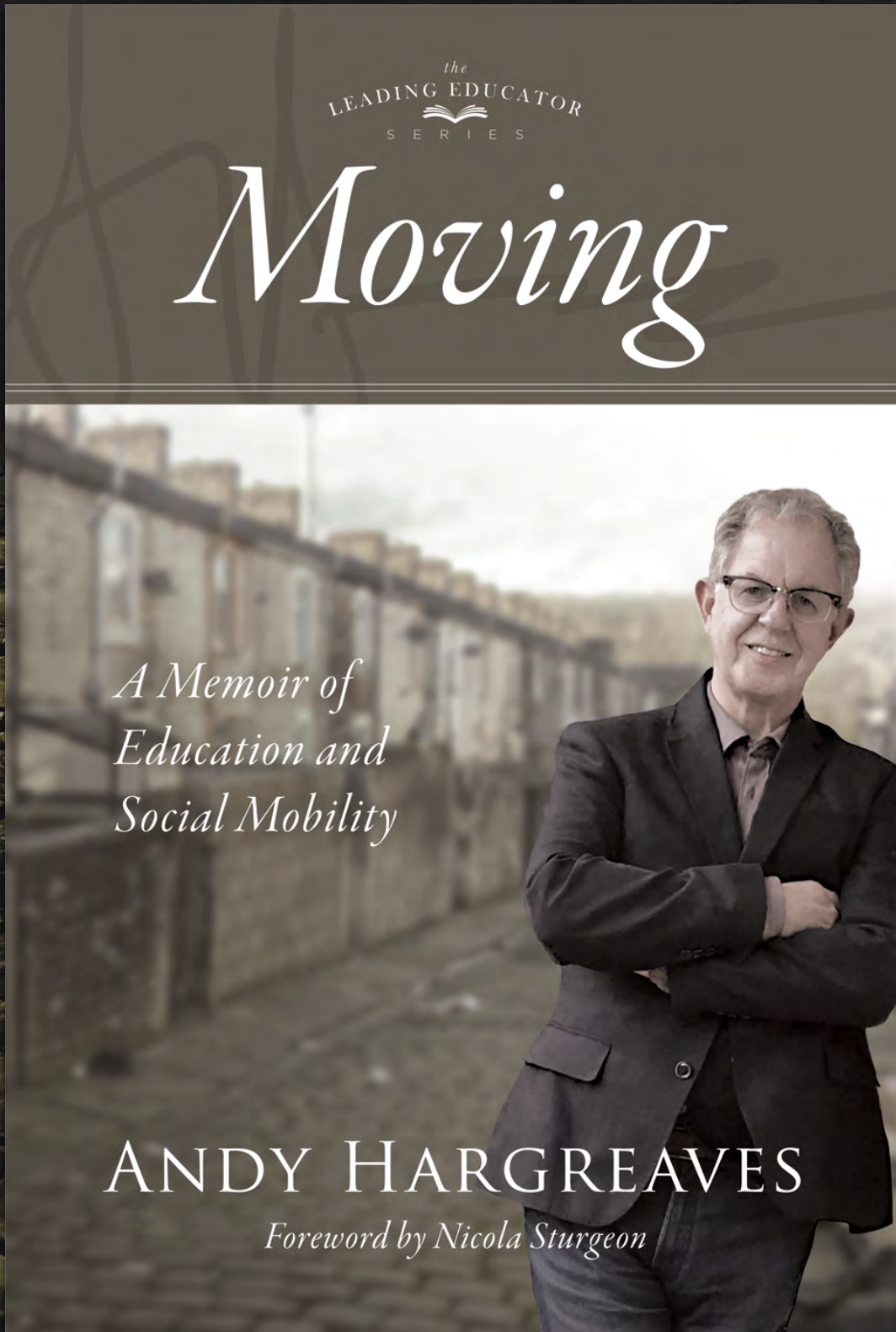


Social Mobility:

the chance, through education, to achieve
greater success than one's parents.

We spoke to author Andy Hargreaves about his new memoir,
the obstacles for socially mobile students and
strategies for addressing both mobility and equity.



Why a memoir? And why now?

AH: As one of Ernest Hemingway's characters explained his bankruptcy, this thing came upon me slowly then all of a sudden. For the longest time though, it never occurred to me at all. In the book, I refer to "my unremarkable life, a life that was never worth keeping a journal for, because who would possibly be interested in it? In the working-class culture I grew up in, we thought of ourselves as 'nothing special'. We had dignity and self-respect, of course, but we didn't feel we had any standout features that could put us on a pedestal above anyone else". Slowly though, in my 50s and 60s, I began to insert small excerpts from my own experience that seemed to connect with the issues I was writing about, to give them a personal grounding. Academics would now call this addressing one's 'positionality'.

But if there was one defining moment when the impetus for a memoir really began, it was sitting with my 93-year-old Mum for nine whole days in hospital when she was unconscious during her last days. My Mum had lived a 'respectable' working class life, widowed at 43, working three jobs cleaning, in shop work and looking after other people's children, while she raised three boys then collapsed under the strain and had to survive on welfare for a while. This is how I describe that moment in the book.

"Over many hours and days, I wrote a short piece about her life – the stories she told, the experiences she had, the things she did – at first, just for its own sake, and because, as a writer, I knew it was one of the few things I could usefully do.

The narrative took on a shape, and I sent it off to the Lancashire Telegraph that my Mum used to have delivered every day. I submitted it not as an obituary but as a tribute to my Mum and also to a way of life shared by women and families like her throughout the region.

The editor wrote back and announced they would publish it as a major feature. Just a couple of days before Mum died, when all the fluid had practically gone from her body, I leaned right over her with family members gathered around. I had no idea whether she could still hear.

"Mum," I said, "I've something to tell you. I've written a piece about you for the Lancashire Telegraph. They say they are going to publish it as a double-page spread

complete with pictures. It's all about you and your life, Mum. A double-page spread. Here's how it starts."

I turned to my text. "Here's the headline"—the one the editors had assigned to it—"How a Loving Accrington Mum Scrimped and Worked for Her Family."

And then I began, "Doris was born in a commode at the back of a sweet shop in Accrington, two years after the end of the Great War . . ."

Barely two sentences in, something happened that we thought was no longer physically possible. From the corner of my Mum's eye, out of a tiny frame that had received no fluid in over a week, a single tear fell slowly down her cheek. Then I stopped. She understood. She knew. And so did I. This life, these lives — lives like ours — are absolutely worth writing about, as many people appreciated when they wrote back to me about the piece in the weeks that followed".

**"This life, these lives — lives
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From this moment, I realized I had something important to say, not just as an act of nostalgia, or keeping a record of things before I got too old, but as something that would be useful to other people, ordinary people, who had struggled hard, given something up, given up a homeland or taken on extra jobs to support their own children's education.

But it was not initially a memoir specifically about social mobility. It was really just about growing up in a working class community. One chapter was focused on social mobility but in time I came to see that other aspects of my past were connected to this theme also. So even after a first draft was done, it took about two more years of writing to establish a tight connection in the narrative between my own experience of mobility and associated issues, what the literature at the time said about them, and how all of it related to people's experiences of mobility and immobility now.

What would you consider to be the greatest obstacle to achievement for socially mobile students?

AH: Now, it's simply the reduced objective chances of being upwardly mobile compared to the golden age when I was able, despite all the struggles, to benefit from the chance. University was free for me. It's not now. Inequalities of income and wealth are much greater. There's less room at the top, and the middle classes (including those who were upwardly mobile themselves) angle for advantage to secure the scarce opportunities that are there: extra tuition, moving to a more elite neighbourhood and set of schools, more afterschool and summer camp activities, more travel and volunteering (which they can afford to support) to add to the CV, greater likelihood of getting a lucrative internship from a relative or family friend, etc. When I grew up, most of your opportunity rested on your raw academic achievement, not also on the expanded CV that's much easier to build in a privileged family.

The other major obstacles are cultural which I describe below.

What was your own greatest obstacle on your path?

Your greatest inspiration?

AH: The greatest obstacle was coming from a working class culture on one side of town and going to a selective middle class high school with an alien curriculum on the other. How did this play out? Trying to manage, keep, and keep apart two sets of friends with different interests and beliefs. Staying connected to the neighbourhood kids in the evenings and then starting homework at around 10pm afterwards. Dealing with the local gang (involving insults and violence) once I was almost the only boy left on my side of town still going to school. Doing all this, working three part time jobs, and missing a lot of school to take care of the house when my Mum eventually had a breakdown. Having a school that couldn't engage with or respond to just basic well-being issues that were getting in the way of my studies and that saw my maths achievement plummet from top to nearly bottom of my class (resulting in lifelong lack of confidence in algebra, etc). And a school curriculum – especially in history – that

was elitist and alien and that I only overcame the second time around by teaching myself the social and economic history of ordinary people, in the evenings, at the local library.

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My greatest inspiration was my final year teacher in primary school, Mary Hindle. She was an experienced innovative teacher who engaged with her students, including me, as whole children, who got us involved in collaborative projects, and who knew how to get the best out of me as a creative but sometimes difficult (and very ADHD in current terms) student. In 2004, when I was asked to return to my old primary school in what was one of the most deprived postal codes in the UK, and lay the foundation stone for the new building, I was delighted to be able to invite her (by then well into her 80s) to do this with me, so that now, her name and mine are inscribed together on the entrance to the school.

One of your big-picture recommendations towards enhancing social mobility is to ensure that students' learning is engaging and often connects with their lives.

Tell us why that's important.

AH: My colleague Dennis Shirley and I say a lot about this in our in-press book with Solution Tree on *Student Engagement: beyond relevance, technology and fun!*

You can get achievement without engagement through stoic endurance or sheer grit and there was a lot of that in my high school days, but especially when kids have many other things in their lives not going their way,

engagement as a basis for achievement is essential. There are many ways to get engagement – being inspiring, creating a sense of awe and mystery, conveying excitement about your own subject, etc. Relevance is a big part of this – though not always (think Harry Potter). This is what culturally responsive teaching is about – though remember that the white working class, indeed all the working class as a social class, needs culturally responsive teaching too. Some of this is about culturally relevant content in literature, social studies etc. But this isn't just about fitting curriculum content to the overall or assumed characteristics of a demographic population (though it is partly that). Kids, all of us, have intersecting identities – you can be FNMI and two spirit, immigrant yet affluent, white but poor, etc. In the end, teachers together (not merely alone) have to understand the whole child, their interests and identities, and find ways to connect the curriculum to them – even with texts that may initially seem strange and alien like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. The point is to get beneath any surface culture of a text and find the deep themes that a great teacher can connect to the cultures and identities of all students in their class by fully understanding their students as well as the curriculum. It's not just about choosing the right texts or topics, it's about pedagogically connecting everything to a student's own prior knowledge and experience and for that you have to know your whole student.

What do you hope that educators and others will draw from this book?

AH: I've already started to receive correspondence from readers of the book – family, friends, colleagues, reviewers, and total strangers. Their long letters and messages usually begin with a few kind words about the book itself and then set out many paragraphs about their own experiences in their families, relating to their parents, as children, and now subsequently as adults. Because my memoir is not about shocking, almost unbelievable, struggles of overcoming upbringings that were downright abusive, desperately poor, or straight-out criminal, people who have experienced more everyday yet very common struggles of their own with things such as hardship at home or being mistreated at school have been able to unlock something in themselves. Many of these, of course, are teachers – one of the professions that receives many members who have moved up from the working class.

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I'm grateful for this. What I also hope is that in reflecting on these struggles, sufferings, and strivings of their own or by their parents (for reasons not only to do with social class), they will be able to draw on them more explicitly to identify and empathize with the struggles and strivings of others, especially their students and their families. There are also signs that they have thought more deeply about the challenges our schools must face of introducing students to new knowledge, cultures and identities without their journey of 'moving on up' meaning that they have to leave a big part of themselves and their culture behind.

Lastly, of course, I also hope people enjoy reading the book as literature. Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is an avid reader and wrote the Foreword for it. People say it is moving, poignant, funny, and insightful and connects everyday experience to big picture issues today. It zooms in and out like a movie. The Director of one of Canada's largest book festivals told me it was one of the best books he'd ever read. It's also got a great rock and roll playlist – from The Dixie Chicks (now, The Chicks) to Leonard Cohen and The Barenaked Ladies! And somewhere, in the last two chapters, it also has a bit of a love story!

You have famously said that “We need fewer initiatives and more initiative.” What initiative should school leaders focus on?

AH: They should focus on their own initiative, and the initiative of their teachers. During the pandemic for example, I have seen too many teachers held back by overly-cautious or controlling bureaucracies in provinces, school districts and sometimes even teacher unions,

from going ahead and making prompt and urgent contact with their most vulnerable students they are most worried about. Teachers were made to wait two weeks and sometimes four weeks in some cases before they were permitted to make the contacts they know are so desperately needed. Of course, there are legitimate reasons behind the caution – treating all students equitably and reaching all of them (including ones with special needs), or ensuring safeguarding so that teachers aren't contacting young kids who might be in inappropriate situations, for example. But these things can be solved quickly by teachers and by school leaders who already work together effectively and responsibly and using their professional judgment to respond to the kids they know best. Firefighters and health workers are usually effective collaborative responders during a crisis. But we have not always enabled and empowered teachers to be effective first responders to their kids. Teachers and leaders need to be given more initiative and also to take more initiative. That is what a strong profession is all about.

What is a particular skillset that school leaders could focus on, and develop, when tasked with leading their schools during a pandemic?

AH: It's the same skillset we've seen from our most effective political leaders globally. Communicate clearly and often, show empathy, work collaboratively, pay attention to the evidence, then be decisive. Be transparent, don't pretend you know more than you do, accept your imperfections, be OK that you'll feel out of your depth sometimes (everyone else is feeling like this too), acknowledge mistakes, learn from them and move on, and don't neglect your own wellbeing either. In the end, it's not about being the leader you want to be; it's about being the leader you need to be.

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What advice would you give to school leaders about how to best lead from the middle?

AH: Understand your own school, community and people. Be responsive to them. Build relationships. Then network with other schools – physically and virtually – to support each other, share and move around expertise, and take collective initiative and responsibility for each other's improvement and success.

What advice would you give to school leaders on how to best build professional capital?

AH: There are three elements of professional capital: human, social and decisional (or decision-making/judgment) capital. Human capital is about individual talent. How do you attract the best talent you can to your school? Build strong partnerships with teacher education providers. Involve teacher candidates in all aspects of the school and its work. Talk to them routinely and casually about how much you enjoy the work and show them why. Treat them royally. Become a human capital magnet that they and others will be drawn to. Social capital is about building collaboration. Value it and develop it, concentrating on the power of the relationships of trust and support as well as on the problem solving capabilities of teamwork. Take an interest in your teams but don't hover over them all the time – including virtually during the pandemic. Last, decisional capital is about judgment and developing it – the best ways to do this are through excellent coaching and mentoring processes, creating a culture where nobody pretends they have got everything perfect, and modeling being a continuous learner yourself by participating in professional learning with your staff, for example (rather than just watching them get professional learning from the corner).

What is your special connection to the Burnley Football Club, and what do school leaders need to know about performing beyond expectations as a leader?

AH: I have supported Burnley Football Club since 1960, when my immediate hometown club went bankrupt and

folded for 40 years. Burnley was one of the next nearest clubs. It's a community club and, in a basic sense, sports support is following your team through good times and bad. Ask any Toronto Maple Leafs fan!

In 2007, I received funding to do case studies of organizations in business, sport and education that were unusually high performers given circumstances of modest size or minimal funding, for example. Burnley fit the criteria and they agreed to let us study them. Coincidentally, this all happened in the year that it became the smallest club ever to enter the English Premier League. Our results were published in a business book: *Uplifting Leadership*. Through this work, I have come to know the Deputy Chairman and the former Chief Executive quite well. When I get the chance to travel back to England, I will always try and find a way to go and watch them.

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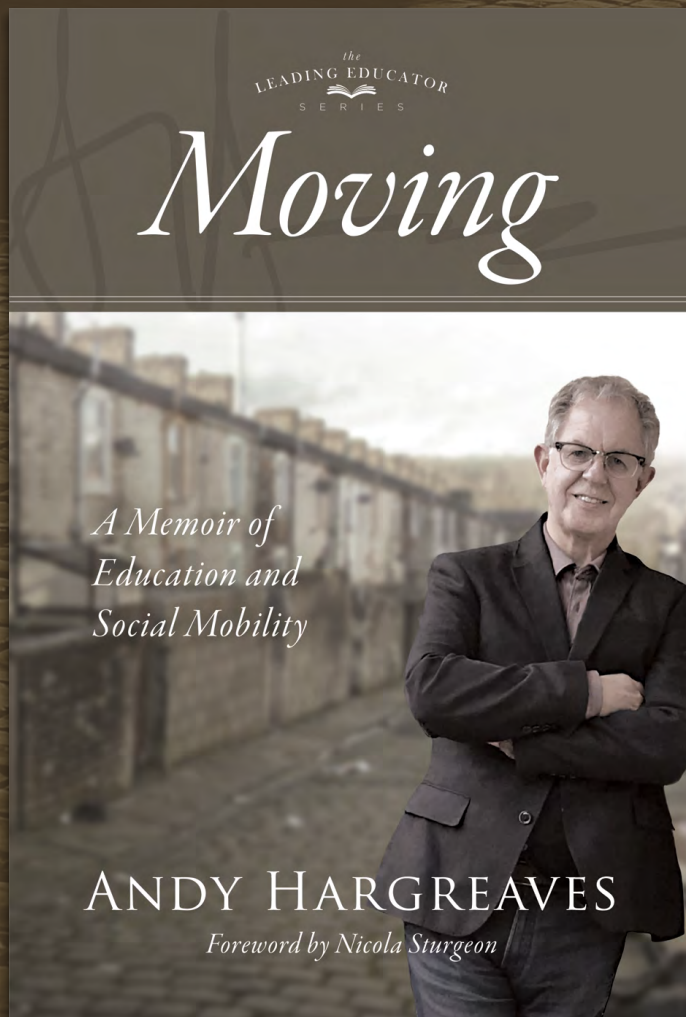
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