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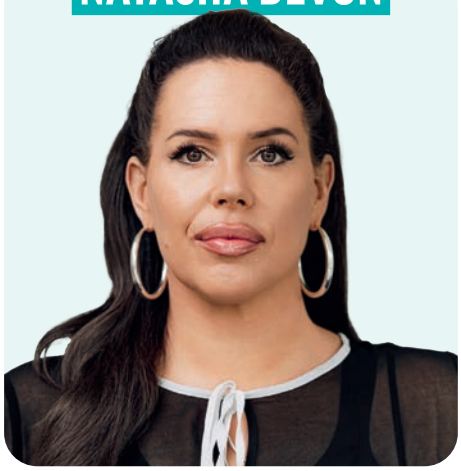

"We must teach better ways of communicating"

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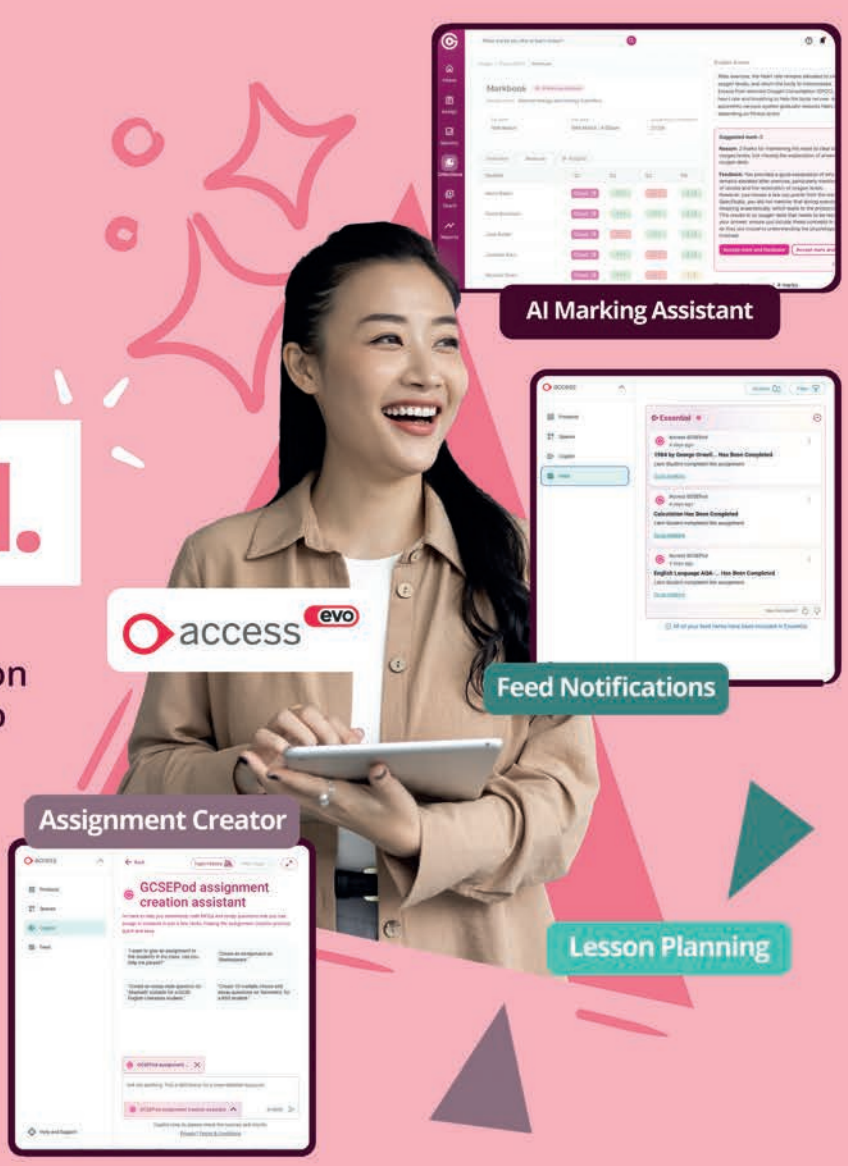

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FROM THE EDITOR

"Welcome...

Teachers might not like to hear it, but some subjects can't help feeling more... dynamic than others. Sure, there will be some theoretical mathematicians beavering away out there on something involving cutting-edge quantum mechanics – but the process by which your students calculate the circumference of a circle isn't going to change from one year to the next.

Citizenship teachers can arguably tell a different story, however. When your subject involves teaching students how the institutions of government and civic society are supposed to operate, what are you meant to do when you turn the TV on at night and hear prominent voices argue for the scrapping of international treaties? Or how certain long-standing Parliamentary procedures and legal precedents need no longer apply?

If you follow what's going on across the Atlantic – as many curious children and teens do – then you too can witness the spectacle of an elected government blithely casting aside legal due process on a daily basis. When what students hear in the classroom contrasts so sharply with what they see happening in the wider world, where does that leave teachers?

As citizenship specialist Helen Blachford discusses on page 50, finding yourself fielding considered questions from students about the ever-turbulent news cycle can be invigorating for a teacher – but also necessitates some careful managing of expectations, unpicking of myths and signposting to reliable information.

Not so long ago, one of the big questions occupying the profession was what the role of education should be in an age when anyone can simply Google whatever facts, figures and details they wish at any time. It doesn't seem to be getting asked as much now.

For a glimpse of how Google envisages *its* role in the years ahead, look no further than the pithy AI-generated summaries that now sit atop the search engine's results page. (Indeed, many users now don't).

Five years ago, there was plenty of discussion around the risks of online disinformation, and if/how students should be taught how to spot it. Given the terrifying speed with which industrial quantities of pure fiction dressed up as fact can now be rendered via convincing sound recordings and video footage, however, it can almost feel as if the battle against weaponised propaganda is already lost.

Still, on the plus side, if the tech titans want to make the internet less reliable in the pursuit of profit, that at least throws into sharp relief what the role of education perhaps ought to be. A bulwark against those determined to obfuscate and mislead. A way of keeping young people grounded in reality. And a light with which to see ourselves – and the different futures that may one day be possible – that much more clearly.

Enjoy the issue,

Callum Fauser
callum.fauser@theteachco.com

On board this issue:

Karen Hart is a teacher, author, and freelance writer

Aaron Swan is an English teacher

Sarah Webber is a food preparation and nutrition teache

George Vlachonikolis is an assistant headteacher

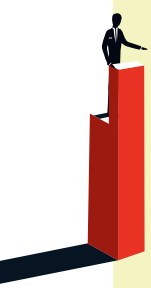
Nikki Cunningham-Smith is a SENCo and SEND/behaviour consultant

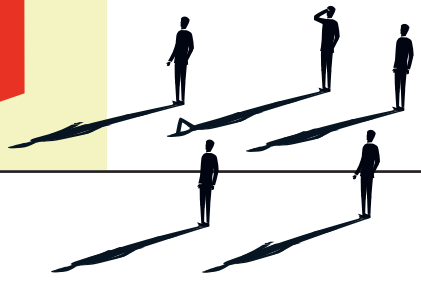
Kit Betts-Masters is a lead practitioner for science

KEEP IN TOUCH!
Sign up for the weekly TS newsletter at **teachwire.net/newsletter**

A satire for the ages
How *Animal Farm* still speaks to contemporary concerns

Essential reading:





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The newsletter

Teach Secondary's digest of the latest goings-on in the profession...

The UNINFORMED teacher's guide to...

AMELIA

For decades, we've seen public safety campaigns, figureheads and slogans be subverted and turned into countercultural icons, or used as tools to propagate the very risks they were originally meant to warn against. Think Charley the cat spitting 'stranger danger' messages over The Prodigy's bangin' techno, or those stark 'PARENTAL ADVISORY – EXPLICIT CONTENT' logos seen on the T-shirts of countless hip-hop fans throughout the 90s.

To this dubious pantheon we can now add Amelia. In her original incarnation, she was a purple-haired character in 'Pathways: Navigating the Internet and Extremism' – a government-funded interactive animation designed to discourage 13- to 18-year-olds in Yorkshire from engaging with far right extremism online and in person. Amelia was portrayed as a friend of the game's player character, tempting them into downloading extremist content, attending hate rallies and joining private social media groups rife with racially-charged resentment.

Well, nefarious actors have now used genAI tools create their own hyper-real Amelia imagery and videos, and deployed text-to-speech utilities to make her parrot far-right talking points. These creations have since gone semi-viral and been celebrated by some of the internet's most deeply unpleasant denizens because *of course they have*. If you're wondering when this nightmare confluence of AI creation, unregulated social media spaces and racist misanthropy will finally get reigned in, you're not alone...

DO SAY
[This content has been blocked]

DON'T SAY
"Say what you will, she knew her planes"

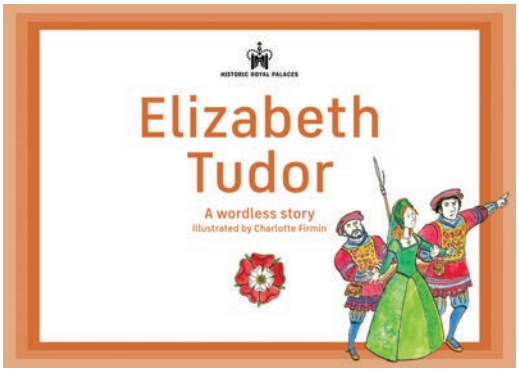
BEAT THE BUDGET

What are we talking about?
'Wordless Stories' by Historic Royal Palaces

Who is it for?
KS3-KS5, students with SEND

What's on offer?
Text-free, illustrated narratives available as downloadable PDFs, designed to be supportive for students with learning disabilities, behavioural or emotional challenges. The first story recounts Elizabeth I's journey to becoming queen, and is accompanied by a set of visual literacy resources for teachers.

Where is it available?
tinyurl.com/ts152-NL1



WHAT THEY SAID...

"We do not want schools producing the next generation of eco-militant zealots"

Suella Braverman MP, who was recently announced as Reform UK's Spokesman (sic) for Education, Skills & Equalities

Think of a number...

492,825

Number of penalty notices issued for unauthorised school absences in 2024/25

Source: DfE

50%
of parents/carers to disabled children under 18 report being 'nervous' about the government's planned SEND support reforms

Source: Censuswide survey commissioned by the charity Sense

30%
of school leaders say that they're 'likely' to resign within the next 12 months (79% of whom cite stress as the main reason)

Source: Survey of school leaders conducted by Arlington Research on behalf of ParentPay Group

ONE FOR THE WALL

"We must all learn a good lesson – how to live together. That is the new challenge of the new world... learning to co-exist and not co-annihilate."

Jesse Jackson

Reasons for leaving

The National Foundation for Educational Research has published a set of findings that teachers and leaders will likely see as not all that surprising – that the increased amount of time school staff now spend on managing pupil behaviour and providing pastoral support has become a major factor in decisions to leave the profession.

Using data from the DfE's 'Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders' survey, the NFER found that leaders' perceptions of pupil behaviour in their school have worsened considerably since 2021/22, and identified a major rise in the proportion of teachers who reported spending 'too much time' dealing with behaviour incidents – from 50% in 2022 to 59% in 2025. Another factor identified as prompting teachers to leave is what many perceive to be an excessive amount of time required for lesson planning.

In terms of those factors prompting teachers to stay, the report points to school leadership that ensures staff feel valued, involves them in school decision-making provides flexible working opportunities as closely linked to improved teacher retention.

The report's recommendations include bolstering external school support services with additional funding and scaling up the DfE's regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) attendance and behaviour hubs programme, following reports of improved pupil behaviour by staff at participating schools. The NFER also recommends that the government place more focus on developing positive and supportive leadership skills across all NPQ programmes for school leaders.

The NFER's full 'What helps to improve teacher retention?' report can be downloaded via tinyurl.com/ts152-NL2

SAVE THE DATE

SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

Forget the media-friendly soundbites – what else was in those announcements and letters you missed?

Education Secretary sets out AI goals

WHO? Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education
WHERE? Bett UK conference
WHEN? 21st January 2026

I'm pleased today to announce our five goals for AI in education. First and foremost, for our children, the support to achieve and thrive in the digital world. Every child leaving school equipped with the media literacy and digital skills that they need to succeed.

That means the right qualifications. Following the Curriculum and Assessment Review, we'll explore the development of a Level 3 qualification in data science and AI, and we're now working to digitise our refreshed National Curriculum, showing links and progression across subjects.

The second goal is for our schools workforce – the confidence and the expertise to make the most of digital and AI. Driving engaging lessons, deploying assistive tech and freeing up teachers to spend more time teaching.

The third goal is for teaching and learning – the right edtech and AI. Tools that are safe and effective, drawing directly from our digital curriculum and shaped by the realities of school life. Building on the best of what the sector is already doing, such as Oak National Academy's innovative AI lesson assistant, Aila, which keeps teachers in control of lesson content creation whilst saving them vital time.

Our fourth goal [is] for a data-driven school system – a new data spine and open data standards to connect and share information, unlocking insights that were previously trapped in closed systems.

And the fifth and final goal, for our schools – safe and reliable connectivity and infrastructure. High-speed internet in every school and much more.

THE RESPONSE:

Government publishes draft guidance on gender-questioning students

Browne Jacobson

FROM? Philip Wood, principal associate at law firm Browne Jacobson
REGARDING? An update to the DfE's 'Keeping children safe in education' guidance, outlining how schools should support gender-questioning students
WHEN? 12th February 2026

"On many of the practical issues schools face in this area, the draft guidance points to existing legal provisions, such as in the use of single-sex toilets and changing facilities. It says that to comply with their statutory duties, schools and colleges should not make exceptions to those legal provisions, but also recognises the importance of accommodating the needs of gender-questioning children by providing alternative arrangements.

However, there is still potential for this guidance to change in future. It remains a contentious area and may be subject to challenge in the courts."

22 MARCH 2026 Music Industry Careers Fest | 7 MAY 2026 Schools and Academies Show | 10 JUNE - 7 JULY 2026 UK Festival of Play

22 MARCH 2026
Music Industry Careers Fest 2026
Liverpool Philharmonic Hall
tinyurl.com/ts152-micf26

A public event at which a number of big names – including songwriter Guy Chambers, Spotify UK, the BBC and Universal Music – will share their insights and advice on how to carve out a career within the music industry. Most pertinent for TS readers will be a 10am to 1.30pm session targeted at secondary school-age musicians and creatives, which will cover music tech, broadcasting and artistic development.

7 MAY 2026
Schools and Academies Show
ExCeL London
schoolsandacademiesshow.co.uk

This regular fixture on the education calendar is once again shaping up to be a rewarding day out for school leaders. As well as a packed CPD programme tailored to the needs of SLTs, there will opportunities to network with and learn from professional peers, a series of talks detailing best practice and sector trends to watch out for, and the chance to get up to speed with the very latest education-focused products and services.

10 JUNE TO 7 JULY 2026
UK Festival of Play
Dundee, Belfast, Rhos-on-Sea, Liverpool, London
tinyurl.com/ts152-UFoP26

Billed as a 'creative computing conference' aimed at attendees aged 9 to 14, this year's UK Festival of Play takes place across five UK locations this summer between 10th June and 7th July, giving visitors the chance to meet industry professionals, learn about the tech that drives video game development and get hands-on with some of the creative tools used by the pros.

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TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

An inspector calls

The school's head and members of SLT were in a meeting with an Ofsted inspector, who was there to gather essential information as part of his pre-inspection visit. The inspector was sat with his back to the window, making him the only person in the room to not witness a dramatic turn of events that took place directly outside.

It later emerged that a student had brought a small gas canister into school and had, reasons known only to them, released the contents of said canister during a lesson, producing a foul, noxious smell. At the direction of their frazzled young class teacher, the panicked students promptly streamed out of the room onto an adjacent grassy area.

Fortunately, the double glazing of the head's office blocked out the sound of the evacuees' coughing and spluttering. The senior team then proceeded to engage the inspector in an intensive face-to-face dialogue to hold his attention and prevent him from witnessing the drama unfolding behind his back.

Their efforts were ultimately undone, however, when the inspector was made very much aware of the situation by the loud arrival of the local Fire Brigade, who set about identifying the gas before disposing of the offending canister...

Excuses, excuses...

I once asked a Y7 student why his shirt wasn't tucked into his trousers. With supreme confidence, he told me that "*Every time I put my hand up to answer a question, it falls out...*"

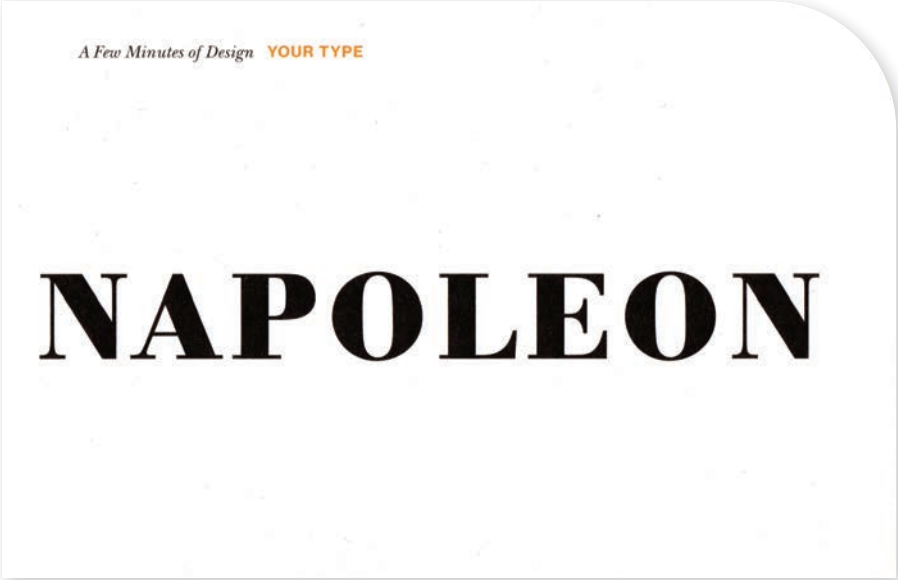
Have a memorable true school tale or anecdote of your own? Share the details, and find more amusing stories, at schoolhumour.co.uk

A FEW MINUTES OF DESIGN

#40 YOUR TYPE

Look carefully at this word. Try to write your name in the same typeface.

Are there clues to any letters that are in your name but not in the sample? Practice drawing the common elements of the letters. What do the curves look like? The line thicknesses? What gives the letters their unique character?



Get Into Film

WATERSHIP DOWN (1978, PG (12+), 88 MINUTES)

Curriculum links: *English Literature, PSHE Education*

A building project in the British countryside threatens the tranquil lives of the local wildlife. A small, nervous rabbit called Fiver has a vivid premonition, in which he foresees their warren being destroyed. Fiver persuades his brother Hazel and a handful of friends to leave in search of a new home – but the life of a rabbit is never easy, and the journey to safety is hampered by predators, hostile colonies and the almighty force of man...

Adapted from Richard Adams' timeless novel, this animation explores religious folklore and societal structures via a compelling tale of animal survival, touching on themes that include democracy, leadership, freedom and utopia. Now widely held up as a cult classic, the film is most suitable for secondary school audiences. Almost 50 years on from its initial release, *Watership Down* has recently been restored in 4K by the British Film Institute and re-released with a new PG certificate.

Discussion questions:

- How are the rabbits' communities organised? Describe the social structures in the different warrens
- How does the film explore the theme of struggle for survival and environmental threat?

When depicting on-screen violence, which is more impactful for young audiences – animation or live action film?

Head online to intofilm.org to stream this film for free and download its film guide, which includes Teacher's Notes for the above discussion points.

Like and subscribe

Who's been saying what on the socials this month?

Emma Turner FCCT @Emma_Turner75
I work with 100s of schools both in the independent & state sector. What's fascinating in both is the number of high performing &/or forward thinking schools that are consciously choosing to go low tech or no tech. There are simply no chn deficit in screen time in this country.

Dissident Teacher @edudissenter
England has developed the best measure for summarizing schools' efficacy: the Progress 8. America needs to import it.

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David Voisin is a head of MFL

DICTIONARY DEEP DIVE

Join **David Voisin** on a rich, and sometimes surprising journey through the points at which literacy, language and vocabulary intersect...

PARDON MY FRENCH

'Motor' and 'engine' are regularly used metaphorically, but older form of transport, such as the noble horse, have also given us many words and expressions. Etymologically, 'equine' and 'equestrian' both stem from Latin. 'Chivalry' comes from the French *'cheval'* and *'chevalier'*, meaning horse and knight respectively. The term 'cavalier', meanwhile – French for horseman – while evidently from the same family as 'cavalry', doesn't carry the same positive connotations as 'chivalrous', instead meaning 'haughty' or 'supercilious'.

TEACHING TIP: WRITE LIKE DICKENS

There are some words that neatly encapsulate both the means and the goal of what we, as teachers, are trying to achieve – one of those being 'agency'. We want our students to be autonomous thinkers and talk about giving them a 'voice'. We want to help young people become independent learners, and eventually active members of society who will shape the world of tomorrow.

But can we give words agency? Consider the following: *"Years of hard labour had carved deep grooves into his face."* Isn't that sentence more evocative than the more prosaic *"He had a wrinkly face, due to years of hard work"*?

Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Emily Brontë were among the masters of this technique. In Eliot's *Middlemarch*, for instance: *"Her eyes had been fed with tears till they shone clear again"*. Or see this example by Brontë: *"The wind had wuthered round the house so long that it seemed part of its structure"*.

Giving students an adjective and asking them to keep the semantics, but instead use a *verb phrase* to convey a deeper meaning via a metaphorical structure, is a great way of helping them to exercise their vocabulary muscles while using both grammar and context.

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

My students often ask me what language I 'think in'. Notwithstanding the fact that thinking isn't always a verbal process, I usually respond with a banal and somewhat disappointing *"It depends..."* However, a more exciting question might be, *"Does the language you speak shape the way you think?"*

Many language professionals have pondered this possibility. It's known as the Sapir-Whorf theory, and comes in two versions: 'linguistic determinism' and 'linguistic relativity'. After years of research and fierce debate, linguists have arrived at a consensus which posits that language doesn't so much 'determine thought' but rather *influences it*. For instance, when speakers of languages that feature gendered nouns are asked to ascribe adjectives to a given noun, they'll tend to go with adjectives that stereotypically reflect said noun's gender. Francophones may choose 'beautiful' or 'elegant' to describe a car (*'La voiture'* – feminine). German or Spanish speakers, on the other hand, may opt for 'imposing' or 'strong' ('car' in those languages being *'Der Wagen'* and *'El coche'* – both masculine).

The late French singer Johnny Hallyday once lamented that the French language didn't lend itself well to the rhythms of Rock 'n' Roll, whereas English grammar was far simpler and more practical. (It takes 12 French words to translate the phrase *"I kicked the door open"*, for example). French is, however, very well adapted to poetry and literature...

SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS

A **dors**al fin stands on the back of an aquatic creature

To en**dors**e an idea means to back or support it

A **doss**ier is a collection of documents or papers backed together

Why parents DRIFT AWAY

Cassie Higgleton shares some successful strategies that schools have used to rebuild and restore their relationships with certain parents and families...

I spend a lot of time talking with school leaders about their parental engagement strategies. They're passionate about trying to understand what's *really* happening when parents start to drift away from secondary schools, and one thing they all tell me is that this is *never about parents who don't care*.

Parents' contact with their child's teachers often drops off a cliff once they move from primary to secondary school. Those easy, familiar chats in the playground or outside the classroom door can too often be replaced by hurried drop-offs on the way to work, a brisk wave as they get back to caring for other family members, or even a deliberate step back as these impending young adults are encouraged to become more independent.

Such changes of behaviour aren't necessarily a sign that parents and guardians have become apathetic, or somehow less interested in their child's education. More often, it reflects a change in circumstances, and the reality of increased commitments and busier family lives.

Whatever the reason, what might appear as 'parental disengagement' is usually more nuanced.

Understanding what's behind this is crucial to building strong relationships between home and school early on, removing barriers to learning and ensuring that students are happy and ready to learn.

A whole school priority

The Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, has indicated that the government's forthcoming White Paper will set out clearer expectations for schools when it comes engaging and communicating with families.

> **"The parent said she'd never thought to tell the school that she was on the brink of homelessness"**

While the full details are yet to be published at the time of writing, many schools are already employing simple yet effective strategies for engaging parents and families across all areas of school life – measures that are helping to strengthen critical relationships between home and school, without adding to already stretched staff workloads.

School leaders I've spoken to all agree that parental engagement works best when it's treated as a whole-school priority, rather than seen as the responsibility of individual teachers. If parents miss information regarding homework, upcoming trips or school meal arrangements, those gaps can quickly create barriers to learning that will go on to affect their children's attendance, behaviour and achievement.

In the view of Emma Darcy, consultant and director of technology for learning at Denbigh High School, "*If parents can't support homework, that's a barrier to learning. If information about a school trip isn't getting home, that's a barrier to learning. If a child's lunch account isn't topped up, that's a barrier to learning.*"

Including parental engagement within the school improvement plan can help senior leaders co-ordinate action across pastoral, teaching and leadership teams.

This can in turn support the setting of measurable targets, such as attendance at parents' evenings, homework completion rates or parental participation in termly meetings.

Progress can then be regularly reviewed, and in the event of any gaps, adjustments can be made to how and when communications go out, or when events are scheduled, in order to encourage better engagement. This will also help to ensure that strategies are rolled out consistently across the school.

As Emma Darcy notes, "*Parental engagement has more impact if it's part of your school improvement plan because it will be linked to milestones and goals, which are far more likely to be achieved.*"

Regular contact and staff training

Strong relationships will usually be fostered through

regular contact between parents and staff – but not everyone is confident with chatting to parents, particularly when discussing sensitive or complicated matters.

As former MAT CEO, Toby Salt, points out, "*Parental engagement training is so important. Not simply training on how to use the school's technology, but [training directed at] helping staff to work well with parents. Ideally, parental engagement training should be built into a school's policy.*"

Mentoring programmes focused on engaging parents can be one effective way of helping staff gain the skills they need. Less experienced teachers could potentially be supported by a head of year who has already established effective relationships with families. This mentoring might include observation, role play activities or structured feedback sessions. Handover processes are also important for ensuring continuity when staff move between year groups or change roles.

Pastoral teams and senior leaders can also step in to support teachers and parents who might be having to confront especially challenging issues, or to help students who are struggling with multiple subjects, coursework deadlines or adjusting to new routines.

What works for your families?

Parents will interact with secondary schools in different ways depending on their circumstances. A parent who works nights, has younger children to care for or who relies on public transport, for example, may not be able to attend daytime meetings, or quickly respond to messages.

School leaders often say that one of the biggest challenges they have to manage is the differing level of expectation among parents. Some parents may be extremely difficult to engage, while others exert large amounts of pressure on school staff and expect regular communications.

Schools can help by clearly explaining what information is available, where families can find it, how to contact staff and what response times to expect for any queries they might have.

Digital platforms – online portals, apps, text alert services – can provide parents with opportunities to check on their child's attendance, behaviour and homework at times that best suit them.

For parents seeking more detailed updates, structured face-to-face appointments or optional after-school workshops can be a good way of providing time for this without overwhelming teaching staff.

Gone quiet

There are several ways in which schools can measure parental engagement, and assess which families are involved in the child's education and which ones are starting to go quiet.

Tracking attendance at parents' evenings, gathering survey responses and checking how many parents are accessing online homework portals can all help to gauge whether your existing engagement strategies are working.

That said, low levels of engagement can also be related to the number of families in your local community who don't speak English as their first language. "*It's extremely beneficial to have staff in school who can converse in the languages of your community*", notes Emma Darcy, "*They can chat to parents on the phone, and provide support at school events. You could also use the translation facilities in tools such as Canva to ensure parents can access written communications.*"

Parents who rarely attend parents' evenings might also appreciate more flexibility when booking appointments, so that they can stay up to date with what's going on in school. Schools that adapt their approach are much more likely to engage families in a way that is meaningful and sustainable.

Taking time to understand

A teacher once shared with me a great example of how their school had addressed an issue with a parent who hadn't been engaging. Staff visited the home, and upon arrival, saw boxes being stacked in the entrance. The parent explained that they were being evicted.

The teacher had noticed changes in the child, but because the child wasn't a fluent speaker, he couldn't explain what was happening. The teacher was, however, able to connect the parent with services that could support her, and eight months on she was still in her home – happy, and fully engaged with the school. The parent said she'd never thought to tell the school that she was on the brink of homelessness.

Taking the time to truly understand what is going on is a game changer.

Developing strong relationships with parents can become more challenging as children move into secondary school. Students will now have multiple teachers, new routines to get used to, expanded friendship groups and eventually the added pressure of preparing for exams. But even if regular contact between home and school falls away, there will still be opportunities to build those relationships over time.

Get parental engagement right, and everything else becomes easier. Students get the support they need, and teachers get to spend less time firefighting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Cassie Higgleton is a former teacher, now senior leader at VenturEd Solutions; for more information, visit venturedsolutions.co.uk

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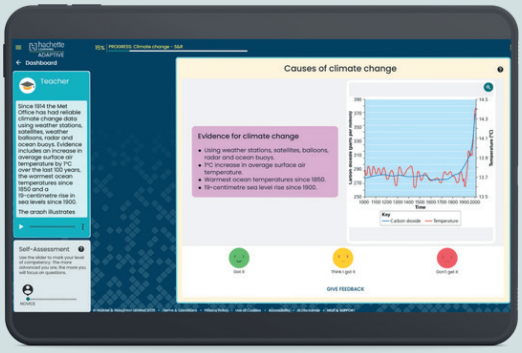

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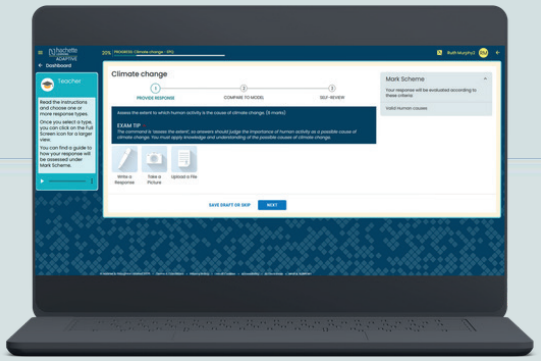

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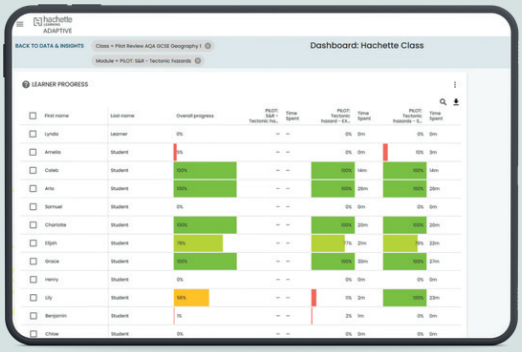

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LET'S END *parents' evenings*

Now little more than a ritual of pointless conversations we endure each year, here's why we should call time on the formal parents' evening...

Ask yourself this simple question, and answer honestly – *what's the point of parents' evenings?*

They're a valuable line of communication? A chance to put faces to names? Perhaps once. But in an age of instant emails, online portals, messaging apps and carefully curated social media feeds where every school has become its own spin doctor, parents' evenings are, by and large, an exercise in theatrical frustration.

Ticking boxes

After 10, 15, 20 years in classrooms up and down the country, you recognise the pattern. It's a ritual of hurried five-minute meetings conducted in echoing gym halls full of folding chairs – or, more recently, in the educational equivalent of an internet chat room — that's less about meaningful dialogue and more about ticking boxes.

Boxes for senior leaders. Boxes for inspection frameworks. And exhaustion for you, the teacher. After all the planning, timetabling, reminders and reminders of the reminders, you reach the end of the evening with one dominant thought – *what was the point*?

Let's pretend, just for a moment, that these evenings are, in fact, genuinely useful. The first issue is that the parents you need to see most don't turn up. There's always a handful who vanish into the ether, leaving you sat staring at an empty chair or a blank screen, wondering if you can risk a quick nip to the loo without getting caught and upbraided.

Sometimes it's not entirely their fault. I once taught a student who, upon realising how much bad news would be revealed, cancelled every one of their parents' appointments in a last-ditch attempt to escape the inevitable. But more often, there's a simpler explanation. They just choose not to come.

Talking points

You know who I mean. The parents who never attend school events, never reply to emails, who treat polite reminders like spam – and yet somehow find the time to text you at 11.07pm on a Sunday about their child's homework. When their slot goes unused, and you glance up as the next parent approaches, you can almost hear the excuses. '*Sorry, the traffic was awful,*' or the classic '*We never get school emails.*' (Except the ones about trips, of course. Those always arrive.)

With the parents you actually need to speak to predictably notable by their absence, you spend 90% of the evening talking to parents you don't really need to see at all. They sit, you smile, and the next three minutes consist of a monologue you could have delivered via a pre-recorded presentation.

At least half of what gets said at parents' evenings could, and should, be condensed into a short explainer video that's sent out the week before. Instead, we shuffle through the same old talking points – attendance, attitude, effort, organisation. The fact that their son or daughter sometimes get distracted during group work, because they're humans and that's what happens.

Bygone relics

And then the worst response from parents of all – a request to compare their child to everyone else.

"*Where would you rank her in the class?*" "*Is he among the top in the year?*" "*Can you tell me how she **really** stacks up?*"

No. Just... no.

You know – and they know – that it's unethical, unhelpful and educationally meaningless to rank children like this. Education isn't a race, yet reassurance is demanded nonetheless. A *position*. A *label*. A quiet confirmation that their child is winning whatever invisible competition they believe is taking place.

So you sit there, smiling and nodding, as you twist yourself into increasingly elaborate knots to avoid accidentally creating a league table of human worth.

If parents' evenings genuinely helped every parent support their child more effectively; if they strengthened relationships between home and school; if they led to measurable improvements in pupil progress, *then* perhaps they could be defended.

But in reality, they're relics of a bygone era, dating from a time when speaking to parents at scale required everyone to be crammed into school halls around rows of identical tables. It's time to move with the times and, more importantly, *respect teachers' time*. And if some parents still insist on the old rituals, perhaps that's the kind of task those mythical 'AI teachers' everyone keeps talking about could take on instead...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

'I, Teacher' is a secondary teacher, teacher trainer and writer challenging binary teaching narratives; for more information, visit **tinyurl.com/ts-ITC** or follow **@i-teacher.bsky.social**

Absenteeism may be a perennial problem that schools have always had to manage, but we know more now about its causes and impacts than ever – and how punitive sanctions may end up doing more harm than good...

Melissa Benn

One of the things I've learned from writing about education over several decades is the way which the same problems come round time and again. In fact, many of the most pressing issues – educational inequality, for example, or funding shortfalls – never really go away.

Absenteeism from school is another, if less high profile example. Anyone tuning into educational debate over the last few years might assume that the failure of a significant percentage of children to turn up to school is largely down to the life-disrupting patterns of the pandemic. While it's true that COVID-induced lockdowns had a huge impact on long term pupil attendance – prompting the Labour government to highlight absenteeism as 'the biggest barrier children face' and set out a detailed 'roadmap' for improvement (see tinyurl.com/ts152-MB1) – it's also the case that a small, yet significant percentage of young people have always failed to attend school for short or longer periods.

Better understanding

Browsing the research on absenteeism, I came across an interesting paper written in 2003, at around the the midpoint of New Labour's time in office. The paper in question looked at how seven local education authorities – the committees of local councils then tasked with determining school policy – were dealing with the issue, concluding that absence from school was *'A high priority policy concern'*, and a long-term *'puzzling and complex problem'* which appeared resistant to government targets (see tinyurl.com/ts152-MB2).

Some things have changed, though – including the vocabulary we use to talk about the issue. The term 'truancy' was once widely used, but now firmly rejected by most professionals. There's also some continuing debate over the usefulness of terms such as 'school refuser', 'emotionally-based school avoidance' ('EBSA') or the more neutral 'school non-attender'.

This itself reflects our more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in school attendance. In decades past, explanations for children 'bunking off' (the casual and rather dismissive term I remember from my own school days) tended to focus on fears of bullying, boredom experienced within school, and lax parenting. Today, there's far more awareness and understanding of the impacts that certain familial situations can have, the emotional problems experiences by young people and the increased pressures of school itself.

In an April 2024 edition of the NSPCC Learning video podcast, for example, you can see two students talk eloquently about the 'stress' of school and the fear of 'burnout' that has driven them and their peers away from education (see https://tinyurl.com/ts152-MB3).

Ramping up the sanctions

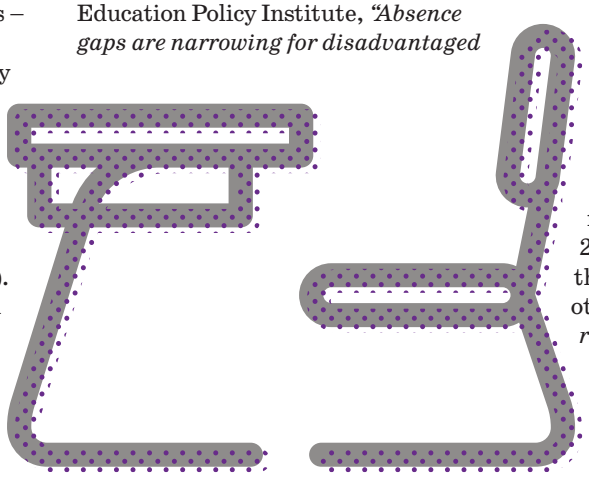
Today's politicians and educationalists also have a much firmer grasp of the challenges faced by SEND students, which appear to be escalating. According to one recent analysis by the Education Policy Institute, *"Absence gaps are narrowing for disadvantaged pupils, but widening for those with SEND,"* (see tinyurl.com/ts152-MB4).

What does not, and will not help is the imposition of sanctions on families. Parents have been legally responsible for their children's attendance at school since the late 19th century, but in recent years we've seen both major governing parties significantly ramp up the size of fines and rate of prosecutions.

Campaigners have tried drawing attention to the negative impact that absence penalties and punishments can have on children and families who are often already under severe stress. The grassroots organisation Square Peg (teamsquarepeg.co.uk), for instance, has called for a *'New framework of understanding'* with respect to school non-attendance – one that places greater focus on its causes, and the ways in ways young people can be reintegrated into schools.

Educational psychologists have also sought to uncover deeper explanations for the underlying causes of school non- attendance and how they should be tackled. Some recent studies have found that – unsurprisingly – pupils are more likely to attend school consistently when they feel included and accepted, and see their strengths, achievements and interests as being positively valued.

As with so many other aspects of education, school non-attendance again demonstrates how important it is that schools nurture the whole human, rather than concentrate disproportionately on boosting raw results. As the aforementioned 2003 report points out, however, this would require require, among other things, "*A stronger focus on retaining staff, developing appropriate curricula, teaching styles and (whole) school ethos.*" Truly, it seems that some things never change...



Melissa Benn (@Melissa_Benn) is the author of *Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service*, and is a Visiting Professor at York St John university

The cut and thrust of traditional, Oxford-style debating has its place, and can equip you with some useful skills – but if we're to meet the demands of the modern age, we'll need a more nuanced, less adversarial way of exchanging views and ideas...

Natasha Devon

We've all had words said to us by a teacher that we've immediately internalised and never forgotten. That happened to me in Y9, when I went (literally) crying to my English teacher, Mrs O'Sullivan, because I had – yet again – been a 'runner up' in one of the public speaking competitions I'd been entering since Y7. I knew I was a good speaker, I asked in frustration – so why did I never win?

"It's because you're not actually a public speaker," Mrs O'Sullivan replied. *"You're a debater."* So I duly signed up for debating club the following year, went on to become county champion, and later chair of my university's debating society...

Presenting with panache

'Oxford Union-style' debating, which was the type I learned, is still considered the pinnacle of the form in most schools. Competitors are given just a few minutes to come up with a compelling argument based on a vague 'motion' ('*This House believes...*'), which they get to define, but there's no necessity for teams to believe the things they're arguing.

The winners will usually be those who present their thoughts with the most panache – and as I know from having participated in many such events, you get massive bonus points if you're funny. No one thinks all that deeply about what they're saying, and no one actually considers whether the opposition might be making some valid points. The whole thing feels more like an intellectual game of tennis than a meaningful discussion.

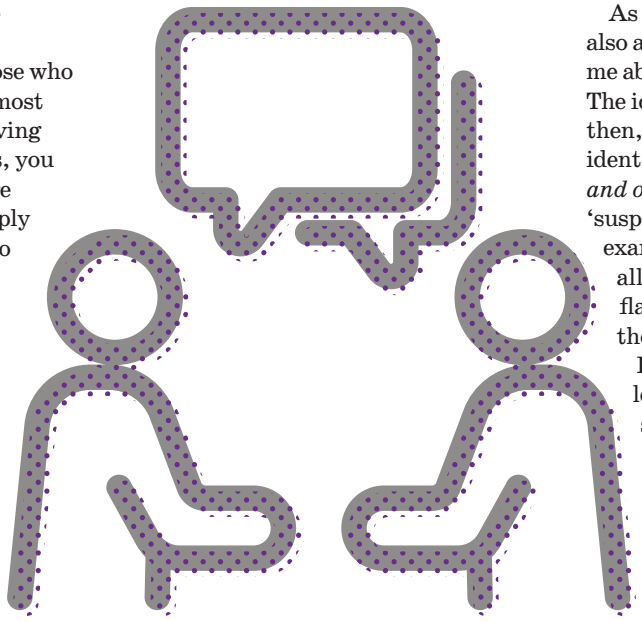
You do learn some useful skills, though. As a girl from a working-class family, debating gave me many tools that helped me to progress in life. It sharpened my ability to think on my feet and explain myself clearly. It improved my confidence, and also got me noticed by the kind of posh people who had useful connections.

'Gotcha' moments

Then again, I didn't go to school in the era of social media, where some of the most successful influencers' shtick revolves around 'owning' and humiliating others. In fact, it could be argued that most internet discourse is an exercise in who can shout the loudest, rather than listening to and understanding others' perspectives.

There's a clear line that links Oxford Union-style debating clubs with social media, where 'gotchas' gain more traction than the sharing of insightful or valuable information. It's a mode of communication that turns us all into caricatures of ourselves, standing for or (more likely) against something, while never acknowledging any complexity or nuance.

Without wanting to sound too dramatic, this has the potential to ruin society, humanity and the world. In an increasingly hostile and polarised age, we must find better ways of communicating.



Whilst writing my latest book (due out in Autumn), I spoke to Jane Ball – founder and trustee of the Academy of Professional Dialogue (aofpd.org). Jane has spent decades taking a technique she developed with colleagues – simply called 'Dialogue' – into prisons, as well as commercial and social settings. She's now focussed on bringing it to schools.

Thinking collectively

We discussed debating, and Jane agreed that traditional ways of teaching it weren't all that useful in the context of modern society. The idea behind Dialogue is to encourage groups of people to actively listen to each other, and respect and value each other's perspectives, so that they can 'think collectively'. When incorporated into classroom practice, Dialogue aims to connect each individual child and their lived experience with the learning material on the curriculum.

As well as expression and voice, it's also about 'noticing' Jane says. She told me about a practice called 'suspension'. The idea is that we take our view, and then, rather than connecting our identity with the idea that *we're right and other people are wrong*, we 'suspend' it. In suspending, we can examine our view more closely, from all angles, and hopefully notice its flaws ourselves, rather than have them pointed out to us.

In an era when children are learning from toxic influencers that shouting over each other is something to aspire to; that pithy catchphrases are more important than thought-out positions; that respecting one another is optional – it might now be time to start swapping debate for dialogue.

Natasha Devon is a writer, broadcaster and campaigner on issues relating to education and mental health; to find out more, visit natashadevon.com or follow @_NatashaDevon

Counting empty desks

The government hopes its new AI targets will improve attendance, but algorithms can't detect the root causes of persistent absence, maintains **Dr Anneke Schmidt**

There's a girl in Y9 who attends every day. Her record is perfect. She arrives on time, sits in class and opens her book. The algorithm tracking her attendance will be pleased.

What it won't see is that she eats lunch alone, because the canteen feels too loud and unpredictable. Or that she stopped speaking in lessons six months ago, and describes going to school as like '*Holding my breath underwater until 3pm*'. She's present, but she's drowning.

Invisible causes

In November last year, the government announced that every school in England would receive an AI-generated attendance target. Schools will be benchmarked by deprivation, location and pupil need, and then given a number to achieve.

The thinking seems to be that better data collection drives better outcomes, but while algorithms can track absence, they can't see what drives it – the fractured belonging, eroded trust and slow collapse of a child's sense that school is a safe place.

AI *excels* at finding patterns. Feed it attendance data and it will duly identify trends, predict risk and compare schools. Those abilities fall short, however, when the problem in question isn't a technical one. Union leaders have warned that many causes of absence are '*Beyond schools' control*' – and those same causes can also sit far beyond what's visible to algorithms.

A category mistake

When Newcastle University researchers examined school attendance problems in 2023, they found that emotional distress lay at the root of 94% of cases. Defiance barely featured. Instead, degrees of anxiety appeared in nearly all instances, often linked to unmet needs among neurodivergent pupils for whom school environments proved overwhelming.

This matters, because you can't code your way out of a crisis rooted in how children feel. The fracturing of friendships, accumulations of sensory overload, determining that staying home is safer than going to school – *these* are what determine whether a child shows up, yet none of them appear in datasets.

> **"You can't code your way out of a crisis rooted in how children feel"**

In this sense, AI attendance targets can be seen as a category mistake – a quantitative solution to a qualitative problem.

Absent while present

In 2025, UCL researchers examined rates of emotional engagement in education settings, and identified some concerning patterns among girls in English secondary schools. In 2019, 43% of Y9 girls strongly agreed that they felt safe at school; by 2023, that figure had fallen to just 21%, nearly double the rate of decline seen among boys. England's decline as a whole was among the steepest internationally.

Timing matters, too. Emotional engagement plummets from Y7 to Y9, just as persistent absence starts to spike. We now know that for many secondary pupils, 'attending school' amounts to sitting in a classroom while feeling fundamentally unsafe. They're physically there, but *emotionally absent*, experiencing what researchers describe as a withdrawal that can precede non-attendance by months, or even years.

Data systems track empty desks. What they miss are the children who shrink into their seats all day, and the internal collapse that can make school attendance feel like an act of endurance.

Belonging, not benchmarks

Emotional safety is the ground on which learning is built. Children don't skip school because they've failed to meet a target; they stay away because trust has been broken, their safety has been compromised and their sense of belonging has been lost.

Despite striking rates of mental distress among secondary pupils, meaningful support remains scarce. The interventions that actually work are all relational, aimed at strengthening connections between students and staff, and towards rebuilding the peer relationships that anchor a young person's sense of security.

Teachers are already shouldering too much of this burden alone. Building a sense of belonging requires institutional design, and schools where trust and cohesion are deeply embedded at all levels.

The government has invested substantial resources in systems that measure attendance and generate targets, but where's the equivalent investment in making children *want* to attend? Where is the relational infrastructure – the support, time and resources – that attendance data can't capture, but which absence always reflects?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dr Anneke Schmidt is a researcher and freelance journalist specialising in education and learning technology; for more information, visit skillandcare.com

Renewed scrutiny

As Ofsted's latest inspection framework takes effect, **Alessandro Capozzi** explains what's at stake for secondary schools, and how online alternative provision can help...

Ofsted's updated inspection framework, effective from November 2025, is reshaping how secondary schools demonstrate quality and impact. These changes will affect all secondary schools, but have particular implications for those supporting students with gaps in learning, SEND and other barriers to engagement, where schools' tailored support and demonstrations of progress will now be even more closely scrutinised.

Drawing on our conversations with Ofsted inspectors and experience in the sector, here are some key areas of importance, alongside some practical considerations for integrating AP effectively into your wider provision.

What has changed?

Instead of reaching a single overall effectiveness grade, inspections now assess seven distinct areas individually: safeguarding; inclusion; curriculum and teaching quality; achievement; attendance and behaviour; personal development and wellbeing; and leadership and governance. Across all areas, inspectors will be placing greater emphasis on transparency, evidence and students' individual journeys.

This raises some practical questions for school leaders. How can you show that every learner's progress is understood, supported and clearly documented? How can interventions be targeted at students facing additional challenges? For many schools, online AP can become a key tool for facilitating the strategic, evidence-led approach the new framework encourages.

The student journey

Inspectors will now expect schools to show how their placement decisions, interventions and academic support are rooted in evidence, appropriately tailored and monitored against each student's respective starting point.

Online AP allows schools to respond flexibly to individual needs. Placement decisions start with meaningful conversations between the school and Academy21, to ensure that both the school's priorities and each student's needs are understood. All mutual agreements and safeguarding arrangements are clearly established from the outset.

Thereafter, progress is then monitored daily through the online Mentor Portal tool, which will capture students' levels of engagement, understanding and interaction lesson-by-lesson, while also tracking their rates of attendance and academic progress. The experience of the learner is shared in its entirety to support the school.

Personal development

Inspectors are also paying closer attention to the quality of schools' curriculum, teaching and personal development. Schools must now demonstrate that students are not only covering required content, but also developing critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, and being given opportunities to practise those skills in meaningful ways.

This is where AP – and online AP, in particular – can be an extremely useful tool. Beyond helping students catch up academically, it will support them in rebuilding confidence, maintaining progress and developing the interpersonal, resilience and general life skills they'll need to navigate adolescence and grow as young people, ready for reintegration.

At KS3, our students are taught structured Skillsbuilder lessons that build on their core knowledge, while simultaneously developing their digital literacy and practical skills. By KS4, students will be working towards their GCSEs and functional skills, while also developing foundational skills across a range of different subjects.

All lessons are supported by regular assessment, and we can also provide extensive wellbeing support via enhanced courses and assemblies.

New for us this year is an additional course targeted directly at preparing for reintegration, delivered via workshop-style sessions that build students' self-understanding, positive routines and planning abilities.

Essential safeguarding

Schools have to show that every student – and particularly those in vulnerable circumstances – is safe, capably supported and able to progress both academically and personally.

Safeguarding is, and always has been critical to our work. Before any placement, we'll take the time to understand each student's circumstances and work closely with schools to ensure their provision is suitable and supportive. We remain a DfE-accredited provision, judged by our own Ofsted report to have effective safeguarding arrangements in place.

At Academy21, students needing additional oversight are reviewed by our DSL team, with any safeguarding concerns raised during placements logged immediately and shared with relevant mentors. Urgent matters are escalated without delay, and we have clear emergency procedures if staff cannot be reached.

The updated framework ultimately highlights the value of evidence-driven, flexible interventions. AP isn't a replacement for mainstream schooling but it can support schools in areas they may struggle to meet - be it addressing gaps at KS3, supporting GCSE readiness, or providing unique pathways for students at risk of disengagement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Alessandro Capozzi is Director of Operations at Academy21; for more information, visit academy21.co.uk

Let your SENCo lead

Professor Geoff Baker, **Craig Lomas** and **Angela Scott** present their ideas for reinventing the role of the SENCo, in ways that will benefit everyone

Last month, we explored how the role of SENCo has often failed to fulfil its original promise (see issue 15.1, 'SENCOs on the Edge'). Rather than sitting at the centre of a strategic web of provision for pupils with SEND, the SENCo is instead frequently positioned at the end of each strand, bearing significant responsibility without having the authority to drive meaningful change.

As expectations from students, staff, parents and external agencies continue to grow, the role has become increasingly unsustainable. One unintended consequence has been the deskilling of teaching colleagues, who will often routinely defer to their SENCo for all SEND-related matters, rather than sharing in ownership of SEND across the whole school.

Here, we'd like to outline four evidence-based strategies for repositioning the SENCo as a *strategic leader* – one who can shape whole-school practice and help build a genuinely inclusive culture.

1. Build collective expertise through training

One effective way of reducing pressure on SENCOs is to shift SEND expertise away from being solely the domain of individual 'experts', and towards becoming a collective capability of the entire workforce.

Too often, SEND training is infrequent, inconsistent or overly generic, typically leaving SENCos as the default problem-solvers for issues that really ought to be addressed through quality-first teaching.

High-quality, SEND-specific professional development could provide a practical and scalable alternative; one that builds additional confidence in inclusive practice, adaptive teaching and early identification. This training must be purposeful, evidence-informed and embedded in classroom practice, rather than delivered via one-off sessions with little follow-up. Teachers, TAs, middle leaders and pastoral staff would all require input tailored to their roles and responsibilities. Crucially, leaders must allocate appropriate time, and work to cultivate a culture in which inclusive practice is valued as a core duty, rather than seen as 'additional work'.

SENCos, for their part, shouldn't be expected to design or deliver all SEND training, but they should retain strategic oversight of what's provided. External specialists can continue to play an important role – particularly when supporting pupils with complex needs – but their impact will only be maximised when they're used to build internal capability through modelling, joint planning, and targeted coaching, rather than through written reports alone.

Developing internal champions for key areas of need will further strengthen your school's resilience and reduce dependency on overstretched individuals or services. When SEND expertise is embedded across the school, we see improvements in early interventions, stronger independent decision-making from staff, and SENCos who can focus on matters of strategic leadership – not just reactive support.

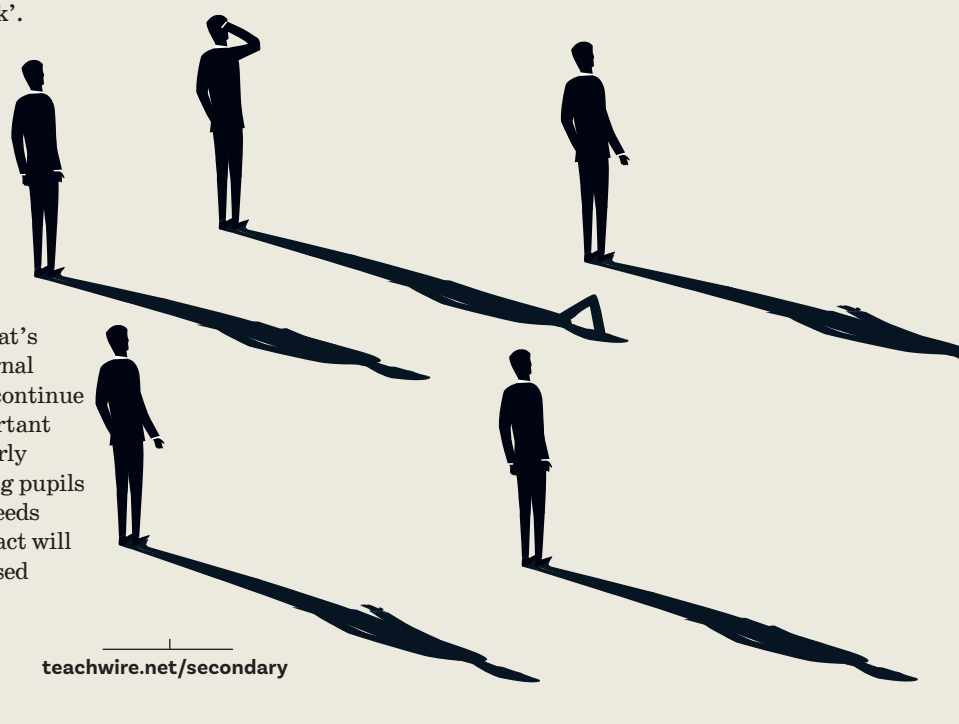
> ***"SENCos should be architects – creative, visionary and collaborative agents tasked with using their skills of co-ordination"***

2. Make the SENCo a strategic leader

Reconceptualising the SENCo role as one involving strategic leadership will demand root and branch reform. But every school has the power to do so. Often, the largest chunk of a SENCo's time will be taken up with EHCP bureaucracy – rendering one of the *most important educational roles in the school* as little more than that of an expensive administrator.

We should seize any opportunities to think more ambitiously. Ofsted's 2025 Inspection Toolkit (see tinyurl.com/ts152-SEND1) provides a potential catalyst for reconceptualising the role of the SENCo.

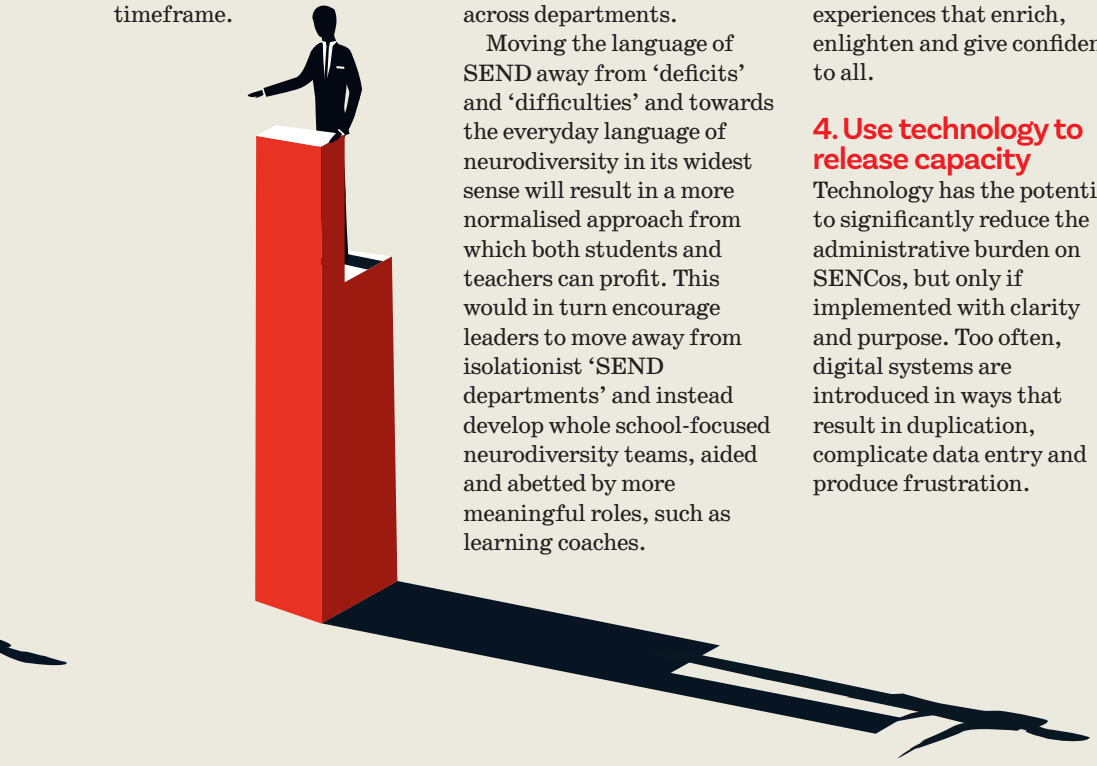
It repositions *all leaders* as those responsible for educating pupils with SEND, and defines the SENCo role as one of empowerment, achievable only if the SENCo has a sufficiently authoritative voice within the leadership structure to lead whole school improvement.



SENCos aren't doctors, merely there to fix – but nor should they be soldiers expected to view their context as a battlefield. They should, in fact, be architects – creative, visionary and collaborative agents tasked with using their skills of co-ordination to bring about strategic transformation.

To reframe the SENCo as a strategic leader, however, their time must be protected. Too often, holders of the role will find themselves overwhelmed by a range of reactive, day-to-day demands that inevitably crowd out more strategic work, but which don't necessarily require the SENCo's immediate involvement.

One approach we've seen from several schools is to remove the SENCo as the first point of contact for new parental enquiries. Through clear and transparent communication, parents can be informed that their concerns have been logged, prioritised according to need and will be addressed within an appropriate timeframe.



Initial triage can then be undertaken by other colleagues, such as a deputy SENCo, thus leaving SENCo closely involved in the *design* of the process but not its routine operation.

When the SENCo does engage, they will be able to provide focused, in-depth support. The result will be improved outcomes for pupils, greater confidence among parents, and the creation of more space for the SENCo to lead strategically, rather than operate in a constant state of reaction.

3. Focus on what makes the biggest difference

When SENCos can use their authoritative voice to add value to standard school practices, the 'doing less by doing differently' dream can come true. Promoting the use of research-based, high value strategies to inform curriculum planning and delivery will reduce cognitive overload for teachers and give the SENCo a credible strategic voice across departments.

Moving the language of SEND away from 'deficits' and 'difficulties' and towards the everyday language of neurodiversity in its widest sense will result in a more normalised approach from which both students and teachers can profit. This would in turn encourage leaders to move away from isolationist 'SEND departments' and instead develop whole school-focused neurodiversity teams, aided and abetted by more meaningful roles, such as learning coaches.

Applying a 'SEND lens' to most, if not all CPD throughout the year would enable SENCos to work collaboratively and constructively with those leaders responsible for planning and delivering CPD, thus positioning SENCos as being responsible for analysing the impact of CPD within the new construct of what the Teacher Development Trust has termed 'didagogy' ('the discipline of teaching teachers').

Replacing SENCo surgeries with 'neurodiversity hubs' would be a further transformative change, removing an implied dependency on the SENCo while broadening the bandwidth of teacher confidence and competence, via an immersive approach centred on the normal occurrence of neurodiversity within any given community. Such hubs could also encourage neurodiverse/divergent staff to draw on the SENCo's co-ordination skills, and further share experiences that enrich, enlighten and give confidence to all.

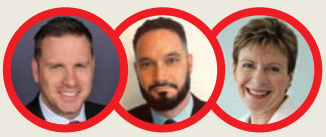
4. Use technology to release capacity

Technology has the potential to significantly reduce the administrative burden on SENCos, but only if implemented with clarity and purpose. Too often, digital systems are introduced in ways that result in duplication, complicate data entry and produce frustration.

The key principle to observe is that technology exists to release capacity, not create additional tasks. When used well, technology can streamline processes such as provision mapping, evidence gathering, and communicating with staff and families. Centralised systems that integrate assessment data, support plans, and review cycles, can reduce the need for multiple spreadsheets and manual tracking – common issues for many SENCos.

Give SENCOs access to accurate information quickly, so that they can focus on decision-making rather than administration. Emerging uses of AI may offer the potential for further workload reduction – such as the drafting of reports, summarising of evidence or identifying patterns in data. When used carefully (and ethically), AI can act as a time-saving assistant supporting professional judgement – though not as a replacement for it.

Collectively, the strategies outlined here could transform the role of SENCo from one of firefighting to one of leadership. Building on shared expertise, protecting SENCos' time, focusing on high-impact practice and using technology wisely will also help to make the role both more sustainable and more powerful – thus enabling SENCOs to truly shape whole-school inclusion, rather than simply manage its consequences.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Professor Geoff Baker is CEO of True Learning Partnership (truelearning.org.uk); Craig Lomas is a senior lecturer in education at the University of Greater Manchester; Angela Scott is national lead for SEND at Eastern Leadership (easternpartnership.co.uk)

Autistic, ADHD, AND OVERLOOKED

Having been diagnosed with autism and ADHD as an adult, **Adam Dean** came to see his own schooldays with a clarity that other educators may find similarly helpful...

I'd like to give you an insight into what it was like being an undiagnosed AuDHD teenager attending school in the 1990s. This isn't about eliciting sympathy; it's about a misunderstood kid shouting up through the decades, telling his story in the hope things get better for the neurodiverse young people of today.

I'm Adam – headteacher of an incredible SEND school in Essex called Chatten Free School. In 2025, I received a diagnosis of autism and ADHD, which was a big moment. Around one in seven people in the UK are currently diagnosed with some form of neurodiversity, which some have suggested amounts to an overdiagnosis, but they're wrong.

We've gotten better at recognising and diagnosing, that's all – and as you'll see, that's something to celebrate.

A life shifted

When the doctor confirmed what I'd long suspected, nothing changed. I was still me. At the same time, however, I experienced a sudden implosion of 40 years of existence, unravelling and tumbling. I was still me, but my life had shifted, prompting me to view my own past through a new paradigm.

It now seemed that I'd muddled my way through the absurdly complex social world of schooling with a different roadmap to everyone else, and sometimes without any map at all. That said, I'd been very lucky. I had parents who loved me, and made wonderful friends who accepted me for who I was. I'd latterly married an incredible wife who really 'gets' me, and worked alongside colleagues who supported me.

One teacher during my own time at school may have suspected something. I remember returning to school following a sick day, and being pulled aside by a friend. The teacher had told my class that *"Adam has a mental chip."* Before that, I'd suspected nothing. I carried those words with me throughout my adult life, translating them in my head to, *"Adam's broken."*

> **"It now seemed that I'd muddled my way through the complex social world of schooling with a different roadmap to everyone else"**

School is a social minefield. When someone shows up who doesn't know the rules, kids can be cruel. I'd tried to hide my lack of social understanding behind masks with varying levels of success (and sometimes, abject failure). I attempted to copy my TV heroes – Superman, Del Boy, Ace Ventura. You can imagine how that went.

Later, I would mimic the behaviour of the popular kids, which seemed to work for a time. I made friends – yay! – but on reflection, this proved to be something of a double-edged sword. The teachers henceforth decided that I was 'naughty', and that the kids I was trying to copy were secretly mocking me.

Class clown

My knowledge of romance was limited to my parents, Disney and *Notting Hill* – all lovely, but not exactly the most helpful approach when you're 13 because, like or not, relationships are a big part of being a teenager.

I remember once writing a poem for one of the popular girls, declaring my love in quite robust terms. I'll never forget the jeering songs that resulted from this, which on one occasion saw a whole school bus singing along, led by my best friend at the time. I don't judge the people involved any more – they were trying to navigate the system themselves, just as I was. But nobody, not even a teacher, ever sat me down and explained why what I was doing might be perceived as strange. As far as I'm aware, no one addressed it with my peers, either.

Later on, I learned that acting a certain way would get me attention and laughs, though I struggled to distinguish being 'laughed at' and 'laughed with'. I thus became the class clown and, I'm sure, a nightmare for certain teachers. I can clearly see now how my clowning was motivated by confusion, but nobody understood that back then.

Alien hieroglyphs

I can't express how difficult social interactions were. Imagine being given the most important test you'll ever do, one that will affect your whole life – except you're sitting it constantly, for 12 straight years, and all the characters on your test paper have been switched to alien hieroglyphs, with nobody else seeming to notice, or care.

I tried alternatives. I hid in concealed spaces around the school with books or a Sony Walkman at break times, but others would find me. I struggled to focus in lessons where the topic, or teaching didn't engage me, irritating teachers with constant distractions.

Conversely, if a lesson interested me I'd become hyper-focused; constantly asking questions to the point of nearly bouncing off the

walls. With hindsight, it's clear that it was my ADHD enabling that hyper-focus at certain times and completely preventing me from focusing at others. If I'd only known then what I know now…

Back on track

Now, at the age of 40, I'm aware that I continue to struggle. I keep discreet fidget toys to hand to help keep me on task, and am fortunate enough to be surrounded by some very kind colleagues and an understanding wife who notice when I lose the thread and will gently nudge me back on track.

The saddest thing about all this is that I'd long assumed there was something wrong with me; that the confusion and inability to focus I'd experienced had always been my fault. These feelings had given way to some 20 years of anxiety, binge drinking, confusion and general clowning, driven by confusion over what the 'basic expectations' people had of me actually were.

That 'mental chip' comment stayed with me for a long time.

So, what can be done? As noted above, one in seven people in the UK is neurodiverse – that's four in a typical class of 30. Some will have received a diagnosis, many won't. Some will have experienced comorbid mental health challenges. Others may have become expert maskers, so consistently quiet and well-behaved you could easily forget they're even there, but still struggling inside nonetheless.

Lessons learned

I see pupils similar to the teenager I once was in classrooms every day – albeit quieter, louder or more concealed versions thereof. If '1990s Adam' could talk to us now, he might request the following:

Learn about autism. Ideally from someone with lived experience. If you're a headteacher or SENCo, arrange for your team to undergo autism training.

Listen to and understand lived experience. Keep an eye out for those young people who might be struggling. Offer support and advice where you can, and make appropriate referrals if needed.

Be patient. Be aware that there may be a disconnect in how you perceive the world compared to how some of your students do. Don't just assume, but instead ask questions, learn and build relationships. Try to understand what their experiences consist of.

Academic intelligence ≠ understanding. We have what's known as a 'spiky profile' – high competence peaks in some skill and knowledge areas, and significant challenge valleys in others.

Watch out for friction or bullying. Teach all of your pupils about the wonderful diversity of minds on our planet, and how those minds can affect the way in which individuals interact with the world. Above all, encourage everyone to be patient, kind and supportive.

Celebrate what neurodiversity brings to the world. There can be an expectation in some schools for everyone to eventually fit in the same box, because *'That's how the adult world operates.'* This is a false assumption. Employers have a legal responsibility to make reasonable adjustments for neurodiverse employees – and in any case, why should your wonderfully diverse pupils all be forced into the same stuffy box? Do you really want to be practising a Victorian model of education in 2026?

The world is full of wonderful creative minds, so celebrate and encourage them just as any great employer would. But more than anything, please keep asking questions, keep reflecting and keep being amazing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Adam Dean is Head of School of Chatten Free School

WHY I LOVE...

Judith Hunt recommends a school tour to the Château du Molay, Normandy

ABOUT ME:

NAME:
Judith Hunt

JOB ROLE:
Faculty Leader for Languages

SCHOOL:
The Chase School, Malvern, Worcestershire

A setting that makes learning feel natural

We first chose the Château du Molay in Normandy because the location made sense for our pupils. It gives us history, language and culture in a contained, low-stress way, which is ideal for Y7. The crossing is easy, the coach journey is short, and once there, pupils feel safe, settled and ready to get involved.

Activities that genuinely interest pupils

The range of activities is a big reason we return. Visits like goat farms and even snail farms sound unusual, but they're brilliant. Food tastings, bowling, discos, karaoke and the blind trail are always highlights. The pupils are busy from morning to evening, and come back buzzing with stories.

Well-run, well-supervised, reassuring for staff

What makes the on-site activities work so well is how they're run. Travelbound staff mostly lead them, so we're there to support behaviour and wellbeing, rather than manage logistics. There's always someone nearby, and nothing feels like too much trouble. That extra layer of support really eases the pressure on staff.

Space to grow in confidence and independence

Because the site is self-contained, pupils are given a sense of independence without loss of supervision. They can explore, meet friends and take part in activities safely. It's often their first trip abroad without parents, and the mix of structure, freedom and fun helps them grow in confidence very quickly.

travelbound

Contact:
To learn more about school trips to Normandy with Travelbound, visit **travelbound.co.uk**, call **01273 244 572** or email **info@travelbound.co.uk**

THE TS GUIDE TO... OUTDOOR LEARNING

Whether it's an exotic odyssey to a far-off land, or a comparatively humble survey of your local urban environment, there are some learning experiences that can only be realised outside of the classroom...

IN THIS SECTION

IN FIGURES:

WHAT WERE THE HEADLINE NUMBERS FOR 2025?

56%
of children and young people report going on school trips to natural places at least once per term

26%
of 12- to 15-year-olds report that most of the time they spent in nature was at school

66%
of children and young people report having been in a garden space (their own or someone else's) in the last week; 62% had visited a park or playground, while 43% had visited grassy areas in nearby streets

Source: The Children's People and Nature Survey for England: 2024 update published by Natural England

3 TEACHWIRE ARTICLES FROM THE ARCHIVES

USE WHAT YOU HAVE
Rebecca Leek finds out how schools can lend an outdoor dimension to their students' learning without any costly procurement or site redevelopment
tinyurl.com/152special1

EXPAND THEIR HORIZONS
Sylvia Holland talks us through the ways in which schools can facilitate unforgettable, learning-rich international trips
tinyurl.com/152special2

WHY EVERY CHILD DESERVES A RESIDENTIAL
Learning away from school and home can help your pupils grow in confidence, develop independence and improve across the curriculum, says Jamie Walls...
tinyurl.com/152special3

A world of ADVENTURE

Nikki Ball reflects on how organising ambitious school trips to far-off countries isn't easy, but can transform students' perspectives, behaviours and prospects

Let's be honest, few things beat that moment when you watch as a student steps off a plane (or even a minibus) and realises the world is much bigger, stranger and more wonderful than they ever imagined.

Whether it's a month living within Costa Rican communities, or 10 days spent on a beach in Greece helping to conserve turtles, these are the moments that remind us why school trips matter. Because when you strip away the WiFi, timetables and TikTok, something special happens – young people reconnect with the real world, with people, with nature, and with themselves.

They're suddenly aware that not everyone lives as they do, and the gratitude that grows from that understanding is powerful. Such trips don't just enrich learning; they build empathy, independence and resilience in ways that are lasting, long after the suitcases are unpacked once they're back home.

Extraordinary ambitions

These kinds of trips enable staff to witness students flourish in ways they'd never see inside a classroom. Our school's visit to Greece was what I'd call a more 'traditional' school trip, albeit with a twist. Our Eco Club – a student leadership group passionate about sustainability – wanted to broaden their horizons and make a genuine difference.

From the very start, these students were heavily involved in shaping what the experience would look like. Over a series of lunchtime meetings, they threw around ideas for potential destinations and causes, while staff began researching how to make it all happen. That research – a mix of late-night internet searches, chats on teacher social media groups, and word-of-mouth recommendations – eventually led us to a travel company with outstanding reviews, all of which we were able to verify through independent checks.

The students wanted to build on a project the club had run in Wales the previous year, though their ambitions quickly grew into something extraordinary – a 10-day turtle conservation expedition in Greece. The prospect of 4am starts and camping on a beach didn't faze them for a moment. Their enthusiasm was contagious.

"Education isn't only about grades or targets – it's about growing as global citizens"

Learning, connection and purpose

So it was that in July 2025, 28 members of the Eco Club set off for Kefalonia, to spend eight days living and working on the island's beaches before finishing with two days of culture and history in Athens. Their days were filled with hands-on conservation activities – monitoring turtle nests, recording turtle populations, and carrying out snorkel and drone surveys to measure seagrass health in the bay.

They also ran a number of public education activities, took part in harbour surveys, attended sustainability and careers workshops and joined litter audits in support of local eco-initiatives.

It turned out to be a packed and purposeful 10 days. The

kind of trip that offers exceptional value for money, though not because of luxury – because of learning, connection and purpose the students got to experience. That they were able to see and do things they'd never previously imagined and came home changed by them.

As one of our Y10 students reflected afterwards, *"I went along as I just wanted to help. The main thing for me was carrying out the turtle surveys, as it was good to see how the turtles needed our help. It made me more interested in the conservation side of things."*

One of the teachers accompanying the trip meanwhile summed it up beautifully: *"This was a wonderful opportunity for all involved. Our students pushed themselves to try new things, building personal resilience and confidence. They were thrown into an environment they'd never experienced before, all without their families, and absolutely rose to the challenge."*

The educational benefits were clear, but the personal development they'd undergone was just as striking. They looked out for each other, worked as a team and ensured everyone felt safe, valued, and part of something meaningful.

A community effort

If Greece was a traditional trip with an environmental twist, then Costa Rica was something entirely different – a full-blown adventure that stretched our students in every possible way.

Challenge-style expeditions have become increasingly popular since COVID, and with good reason, since they tend to combine volunteering, sustainability, adventure and travel into one extraordinary experience. A quick online search will reveal a host of reputable providers, but we were clear on what we wanted from the beginning – a trip that would be inclusive, purposeful, and life-changing.

Working out at around £4,800 per student, this was never going to be a budget trip, but we were determined that the cost shouldn't become a barrier. The experience was open to all, with fundraising becoming part of the journey itself.

The travel company provided full parental communication, ran a launch evening for parents and students, and delivered a fundraising workshop, as well as managing all payments directly, which took a huge administrative weight off the school.

From there, the fundraising process became a genuine community effort. The school provided spaces for bake sales, quiz nights and craft fairs, waiving all hall and stall fees. The students quickly found other creative ways of raising the money themselves, with the result that local cafés were soon hosting additional pop-up markets, and families began donating raffle prizes, as the entire school rallied behind them.

Time for adventure

When the time came, 48 students and four staff embarked on a month-long expedition to Costa Rica, travelling from wetlands in the north to the highlands in the south. Each group was supported by an experienced expedition leader, with school staff providing pastoral care and reassurance when needed; familiar faces in an unfamiliar world.

The students all lived and worked within local communities, tackling environmental and social projects that left a lasting impact. They taught English to disadvantaged children, built a greenhouse, repaired a path that facilitated wheelchair access to a local beach and took part in vital reforestation work. Every day brought new challenges and taught them new lessons in teamwork, humility and gratitude.

There was also time for adventure. Students earned PADI diving qualifications, spotted whales and dolphins from boats, and one student even celebrated their 16th birthday by waking up in a hammock on the beach – not your average teenage milestone.

Different people

As one of our Y12 students later reflected, *"It was incredible. I'd do it again in a heartbeat. It was good to get away from our real world, where people spend all day on their phones. We learnt that not everyone is as lucky as we are. We're lucky to have what we have, and this trip has made us more grateful.*

"I really liked how appreciative the community was after we did some work for them. We could tell it really meant something to them. It was an eye-opening experience. I've made new friends, as I had the opportunity to speak to people I wouldn't normally."

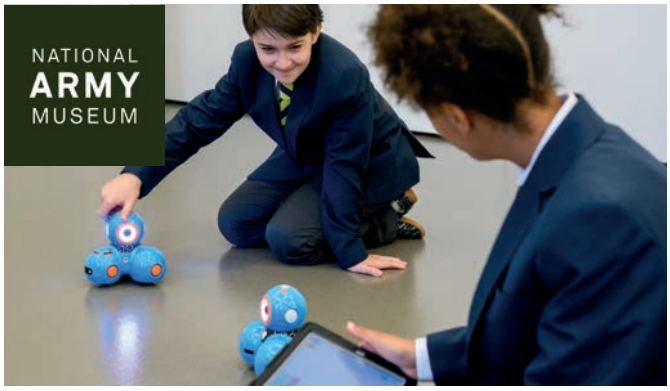
For staff, watching students use their Spanish skills to talk, laugh and teach with local children was unforgettable. Their learning came alive in the most human way possible, through conversation, connection, and play. Friendships formed across year groups, barriers disappeared, and confidence soared.

By the time they returned home, they weren't just different students; they were quite different people. Trips like this remind us that education isn't only about grades or targets. It's about growing as global citizens, understanding privilege, appreciating difference and realising that empathy, courage, and kindness are as valuable as any qualification.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Nikki Ball is assistant headteacher at Mayflower High School, Essex

4 National Army Museum

REASONS TO TRY...



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3 TEST PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

Pupils can explore how robotic devices are used by the Army in the 'Operation Robot' coding mission and complete programming challenges using block-coding and 'Dash' robots in order to navigate obstacles.

4 INTERACTIVE GALLERIES

Schools visiting the Museum will get to enjoy a variety of gallery displays and interactive exhibits featuring weaponry, communications, transport and medical equipment, and discover how innovations in science and technology have impacted the Army over time.

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learning@nam.ac.uk | nam.ac.uk/schools

At a glance

+ All workshops are free of charge; detailed listings can be found at nam.ac.uk/schools/workshops

+ Our resources are also available free of charge, and can be downloaded via nam.ac.uk/schools/learning-resources

+ All school sessions must be pre-booked via the form found at our website – book early to avoid disappointment

+ Pre-booked groups at the Museum can be provided with bag and coat drop facilities, as well as a lunch room space

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*Price comparison based on lowest two night stay (£187.75 M-W in Nov and Dec) with highest (£335.27 May-Aug) using 2026 prices.

Q&A

"A calmer environment for learning"

Empower your colleagues with the ability to conduct brilliant lessons in nature with the help of Coventry Outdoors

30 SECOND BRIEFING

Coventry Outdoors – the dedicated Outdoor Learning Service of Coventry City Council – provides exceptional CPD and accredited Level 5 apprenticeships opportunities across the UK. We empower educators through Forest School, WILD Passport and therapeutic training, giving them the expertise to deliver high-impact, sustainable outdoor learning in any setting.

What range of qualifications does Coventry Outdoors offer?
We offer a complete suite of professional qualifications designed to suit different needs. Alongside popular options, like WILD Passport and Forest School Leader awards, we also offer specialised training in Wilderness Therapeutic Interventions and Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC). For schools looking to take a more strategic approach, our Level 5 Outdoor Learning Specialist apprenticeship is a brilliant way to develop a resident expert who can lead curriculum-wide change.

How does outdoor learning improve wellbeing and school behaviour?
Spending time outdoors lowers cortisol levels, gives physical and emotional space to pupils and provides a calmer environment for learning. This in turn leads to improved emotional regulation and behaviour, meaning schools can reduce the time and money spent on crisis management. Improved behaviour lets resources be reallocated into proactive teaching, making outdoor learning a preventative approach that can be used to support student mental health, while having a direct impact on school finances.

How can outdoor learning drive academic attainment?
Outdoor learning has been shown to assist in closing the academic gap for many students. By providing opportunities to contextualise classroom learning – measuring wood before it's cut, identifying insects in their native habitats, exploring heritage skills – we're helping to embed classroom knowledge, build deeper understanding and encourage greater curiosity. Better engagement inevitably leads to better classroom participation and improved performance in assessments.

COVENTRY OUTDOORS
EDUCATION & ADVENTURE SERVICE

ABOUT US:
Part of Coventry City Council, we provide expert-led outdoor education training and qualifications for schools nationally.

Contact:
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Why should schools choose a council-run service for their CPD?
Partnering with Coventry City Council gives schools peace of mind. You aren't just getting a trainer – you're getting a service that understands local authority safeguarding, health and safety, and curriculum standards. We're not profit-driven, and therefore appreciate the need for long-term social and financial value, as well as educational outcomes. We want schools across the nation to develop a sustainable approach to outdoor learning.

How can schools apply for apprenticeships?
Whilst we are a Coventry-based service, we are actively expanding and encourage applications from schools across the UK to help form new apprenticeship cohorts. We're currently recruiting for our major September intake, with dedicated cohorts already established in Coventry and Yorkshire. We also welcome interest from any national organisations keen to partner with us in creating new regional cohorts.

What's the difference?

+ Trusted local authority expertise – we combine council-level quality assurance with years of practical, on-the-ground outdoor teaching experience
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Urban excursions

Built-up and urban areas can be rich sites for outdoor learning – so long as you've done sufficient planning and preparation beforehand, writes **Nikki Cunningham-Smith**...

We can often get distracted by news stories lamenting Britain's decaying high streets, and how online shopping habits have sounded the death knell for town spaces. Most of us probably wouldn't think of town as our first choice of space in which to engage students with outside learning, but exploring urban spaces can actually yield learning opportunities that can't be replicated in the classroom.

From architecture and public art, to businesses, transport systems and diverse communities, there are many cross-curricular opportunities to be had. Geography? Visible land use. History? The origins of street and building names. Business studies? What the presence of certain shops and outlets tells us about consumer demand.

Taking classes into urban environments will, however, entail a number of safeguarding, behaviour and logistical challenges. Crowds, traffic, unfamiliar routes and public access routes all pose potential risks, with successful urban visits requiring careful planning, clear expectations and proactive monitoring.

Here, then, are five ways to ensure your next urban excursion runs smoothly...

1. Lead with purpose, not place

As with any lesson, planning for an urban excursion should always begin with a clear learning outcome. What will pupils learn on the trip that they can't learn in school? How will they be able to demonstrate said learning, and what prior knowledge – if any – will they need to fully engage with the destination?

Pre-teach any relevant vocabulary, maps and context, and be sure to involve any additional adults who'll be joining you in your preparations, rather than just giving them a hasty briefing on the day itself.

2. Support pupils with additional needs

Ensure that pupils' additional needs are factored in from the start, including their access requirements, sensory demands, communication and any extra staffing needs. Pre-visits, visual supports and clear routines can all help to reduce anxiety and improve safety on the day. Establishing regular communications with families early on will help staff ensure that any needed adjustments are put in place in good time.

3. Risk assess on paper and dynamically

You won't be able to leave the school site without first filling out a paper risk assessment and running it by your school's Educational Visit Coordinator, but with urban visits it's important to also think *dynamically*. Bear in mind that crowd densities can fluctuate at different times of day, weather can impact movement and visibility and that antisocial behaviour may pose significant risks

Consider checking in with the destination's tourist information office, or contacting the school liaison officer of the local police force, who'll be able to provide some useful information and advise on hotspots to avoid.

4. Ratios and strategy matters

Most school trips occur in contained areas, allowing you to place adults with groups in the knowledge that there are only a limited of number areas they can wander off to (whether intentionally or accidentally).

For urban excursions, consider appointing a 'lead adult', who will set the pace and general navigation, one or more 'middle adults' to monitor group cohesion and a 'rear adult' to ensure no one falls behind.

5. Teach 'urban behaviour'

Whether due to ease of online social interactions conducted from their bedrooms, or the decline of youth-oriented real world social spaces, we can no longer assume that students will 'just know' how to interact and behave safely outside of their homes in busy public spaces.

Before the trip, teach and practise walking pace and formation, road crossing expectations, escalator and transport behaviour, and what students should do if they become separated. You should also cover the importance of time check-in intervals, how to distinguish between a routine issue and an emergency, and how students should respond to unwanted public interaction.

Ensure that all students and staff will be carrying emergency phone numbers, and remember that visual management is essential in crowded areas – something that could be addressed by issuing high-visibility lanyards or badges.

If done right, urban excursions can provide students with opportunities to acquire cultural capital, develop their resilience and gain real-world understanding. With thoughtful preparation and clear systems in place, the risks can become manageable and the rewards significant.

Nikki Cunningham-Smith is a SENCo and SEND/behaviour Consultant at Cee Es Education; for more information, visit cee-eseducation.com or follow @cee_es_education (Insta)

Q&A

Environments where learning flourishes

Stephen Toone explains why schools can afford to think beyond basic rain protection and get more creative with their outdoor learning spaces

30 SECOND BRIEFING

Fordingbridge creates weather-proof spaces where school life can thrive all year round. From outdoor learning and dining areas, to social hubs, MUGAs, covered walkways and bike storage, schools across the UK are transformed by their bespoke and off-the-shelf canopy solutions.

When space is at a premium, why is it important to incorporate covered outdoor learning areas?
The impact of outdoor learning is nothing short of transformational. In the largest study of its kind into its benefits, 92% of teachers said students were more engaged with learning when outdoors, 92% of students said they enjoyed their lessons more, and 85% of teachers saw a positive impact on student behaviour (see tinyurl.com/ts152-F1).

Are there any other benefits schools can expect to see?
Absolutely! Making space for outdoor learning isn't just about promoting stronger engagement – it's about wider health and wellbeing. In the study referenced above, 70% of teachers said outdoor learning had a positive impact on their job satisfaction, 72% reported improved wellbeing, and an impressive 90% of students felt happier and healthier for having outdoor learning opportunities incorporated into school life.

Where are the best places to incorporate outdoor learning facilities on a school site?
The beauty of all-weather outdoor learning areas is that they can be located anywhere. We've covered courtyards, large playground areas and even created outdoor learning areas that run the length of several classrooms, while being no more than 2m deep. Even the smallest covered spaces enhance school life.

FORDINGBRIDGE inspiring design + build

Contact:
01243 554 455 | fordingbridge.co.uk | info@fordingbridge.co.uk

What are the main considerations to factor in when creating an outdoor learning area?
Think multi-use to get the most out of your space. Incorporating picnic bench-style seating under your outdoor learning canopy will create a space that not only promotes team learning experiences, but also provides attractive all-weather dining – perfect for schools experiencing pressures on their internal facilities.

ABOUT STEPHEN:
Stephen Toone is the Managing Director of Fordingbridge

Are there any other design ideas that elevate these spaces?
Try to ensure your new space fits seamlessly in its surroundings. We create hybrid steel and wood structures that sit harmoniously in natural environments, or can powder coat structures in a school's colours. It's common in the UK to focus exclusively on rain protection, but think about sun protection too. Our unique Opal 60 roofing creates light-filled learning spaces while screening out harmful UV rays, to offer true year-round shelter.

What's the difference?

All-weather education solutions specialist, Fordingbridge, offers a suite of benefits to schools:

+ Complimentary site visits that can unlock the hidden potential in your space
+ One expert partner who will be accountable to you from concept to completion
+ Future-proofed structures backed by class-leading 25-year guarantees

ACCESS *all areas*

Rebecca Leek shares some advice on how to ensure *all* students get to join the next trip you have planned...

When it comes to inclusion, reasonable adjustments and additional needs, the most powerful approach is to build accessibility into the design, and to have an established inclusive culture in place.

So what does this look like when applied to off-site trips? Here are five key principles to consider...

1. Bring the edges in

It's easy – and lazy – to take a well-worn trip plan you've followed for years, and then try 'bolting on' some adjustments as an afterthought. Instead, bring your SEND students into the centre of your planning process. You may well have a 'tried and tested formula', but that doesn't mean you should always do the same thing each year.

If you've previously visited a certain location that now presents insurmountable access issues – a bird reserve with remote viewing hides, for instance – let this difficulty lead you into considering alternatives. You could perhaps organise a train journey to a coastal or estuarine town, or set up an outing with the help of local birdwatching groups. Is there, say, a falconry expert who could open up the area in a whole new way?

Are there any specific sights or pursuits that might capture your students' attention? Talk to them and find out. So long as there's relevance to the curriculum, let their interests and requirements inform your decision making.

2. Work with locations and hosts

Many organisations are keen to provide accessible experiences; if you conclude that an organisation won't be able to accommodate a particular need without asking them, you'll be doing them a disservice. I've had great success when asking whether a certain offer can be adapted. Even the most jumbled of museums can work with you creatively to enable access.

Contacting companies and going through your requirements can provide them with an opportunity to improve and change, in partnership with you.

3. Peer support

Your group of students and adults are a team – so how can you all work effectively together to make the trip or visit a success? If you're planning a residential and know that someone's going to struggle emotionally, work with them and their peers to ensure there's a circle of support there for them.

Such conversations should start early, but it's even better to make this an in-built part of your school's culture. Support connections amongst peers, and let your students know how important it is that we all help each other.

4. Less is more

Sometimes, just being *somewhere else* can be of huge value to students. Don't underestimate how important those small, incidental moments – which might seem like time-wasting breaks to you – can actually be. If you have a student who struggles with fatigue or maintaining focus, you can build in pauses which will ultimately benefit everyone. That moment in a church or a park where you give everyone 10 minutes to relax will add value to the day.

Your trips may have a specific, curriculum-focused purpose, but we have a duty to provide spiritual and social education too. Those moments of calm, and opportunities for socialising are important, so just don't see rest breaks as an annoyance. Weave them into your vision for the day.

5. Manage the risks

I once worked at a school around 30 minutes from the coast. The children in my class had never gone on an organised beach trip, or even been allowed in the sea, because it was deemed 'too risky'. I was therefore pleased to use a coastal trip as both a risk management exercise, and as an excellent training opportunity. Managing risk is, after all, an essential leadership skill that all future leaders will have grapple with at some stage.

As a starting point, internalise the phrase, '*There is a risk that... and this could result in.*' Then build in your own possible mitigations: '*There is a risk that **X could not follow instructions when in the water**. This could result in **serious injury or death**.*' Sounds terrifying, but how can you reduce the likelihood of that happening? You could, for example, work with the young person well in advance, involve their peers, consider staff ratios in the water and think about where staff should be placed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Rebecca Leek has been a primary and secondary teacher, SENCo. headteacher and MAT CEO; she is currently the Executive Director of the Suffolk Primary Headteacher's Association

Spring school trips

Educate, inspire, amaze and reward your students by exploring these best-in-class destinations, services and travel accessories

HIVE IN THE FOREST

The Hive – nestled within seven acres of blissful woodland and buzzing habitats in Epping Forest – has been delivering high quality, hands-on nature-based learning for schools, families and community groups for over 50 years. Our experiences aim to inspire young people so that they develop a love for the natural world and feel empowered to protect it. We can offer day visits for EYFS learners up to A Level students and post-16, as well as residential visits for KS2 and upwards. To find out more, visit **thehiveintheforest.co.uk** or email **thehive@walthamforest.gov.uk**.

MUSEUM OF ROYAL WORCESTER

Spark your students' sense of curiosity and creativity at the Museum of Royal Worcester, which celebrates 250 years of industrial heritage. Take your students on an inspirational education visit, where they'll get to explore world-class art and design, scientific innovation and some fascinating social history that reveals the true stories of the people behind the porcelain.

We can offer KS3 curriculum-linked opportunities that delve into art and design, history and STEM.

Our Discover Workshops will enhance your students' problem-solving and team-working skills, offering creative experiences, scenario-based learning and trails and quizzes, all within in our inspiring galleries. For more information, visit **museumofroyalworcester.org/education.**

YMCA LAKESIDE

Take your students on an all-inclusive Lake District residential at Windermere, with prices starting from just £187.75pp, courtesy of YMCA Lakeside.

From ropes courses to raft building, see your pupils flourish in a newly constructed learning site set within 100 acres of woodland and lakeshore. Build confidence, resilience, teamwork and other essential life skills through a residential trip specifically designed to meet your goals. Pupils will get to build on and embed new skills each day through participating quality, instructor-led activities. From the first challenge to the final debrief, each moment is intentional.

Time away from home creates unique opportunities for learning, and will strengthens your pupils' relationships with their peers and teachers. Discover why schools choose us by visiting **lakesideymca.co.uk**, contacting **01539 539 000** or emailing **lakesidebookings@fyldecoastymca.org**.

AIRHOP ADVENTURE PARKS

School trips to AirHop Adventure Parks offer an exciting, educational and well-managed experience that gets students moving while supporting health, confidence and teamwork. From clear pre-visit planning to structured on-site sessions, every detail is designed for safety, inclusivity and fun. Trained staff, accessible facilities and engaging trampoline-based activities encourage physical development, coordination and resilience.

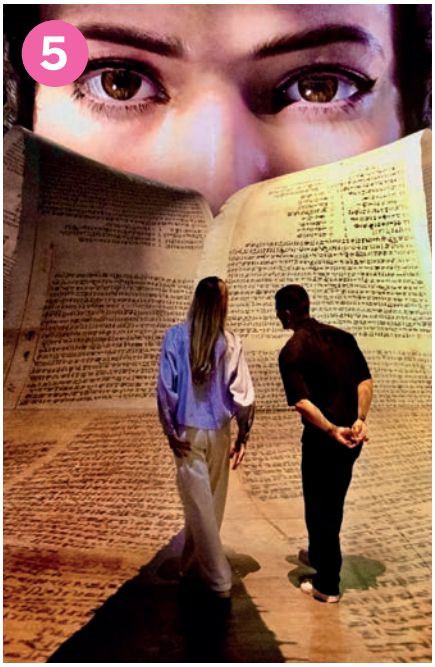
Schools can choose tailored sessions suited to different ages and abilities, thus ensuring that every student gets to benefit from active learning. With their transparent pricing and focus on wellbeing, AirHop Adventure Parks turn school visits into energetic, memorable experiences that promote healthy lifestyles. Visit **airhop.co.uk** or get in touch via **info@airhop.co.uk**.

CLEOPATRA: THE EXPERIENCE

Travel back in time to discover the secrets of Egypt's last Queen! A 3D hologram, 360° projections, seated VR and free-roaming metaverse experiences, real artefacts, interactive displays and more(!) combine to bring Cleopatra's story to life like never before.

Discounted rates are available for school groups, with prices starting at £10 per pupil. Doors will open at Immerse LDN, Excel London Waterfront from 26th March for 15 weeks only. Book your trip today and become the most popular teacher in town!

For more details, visit **cleopatraexperience.co.uk/london/groups**



SKIBOUND

SkiBound makes organising a school ski trip simple, safe and unforgettable. From doorstep skiing at its exclusive French Clubhotels, to a North American adventure with exciting city stopovers to iconic cities like New York and Boston, SkiBound can handle all the details, leaving you free to focus on the experience.

Its trips are fully bonded by ABTA and ATOL, and meet rigorous School Travel Forum and LotC Quality Badge standards, giving you complete peace of mind. With expert planning and après activities that build confidence, teamwork and independence, SkiBound helps students create memories that last a lifetime. To find out how you can plan the ultimate school ski experience, visit **skibound.co.uk** or call **01273 244 570**.

WE THE CURIOUS

If you're looking to build interest and confidence in STEM this spring, check out Bristol's playful and surprising science experience, We The Curious.

This science centre on Bristol's harbourside is brimming with interactive exhibits exploring illusions, sound, space, animation and much more. Students can enjoy awe-inspiring trips to the stars in the 3D Planetarium, and spend time reflecting on some of life's big questions in the unique 'Project What If' exhibition.

School groups can combine a visit to the exhibition floors with a choice of practical, curriculum-linked workshops led by experienced presenters on topics that range from climate change and earthquakes to forensics and psychology. For more information, contact **education@wethecurious.org** or visit **wethecurious.org**.

Let's talk TOGETHER

Charlotte Lander offers some advice for making effective and efficient use of collaborative talk within your lessons

When classroom discussion is planned and implemented effectively, our learners have an opportunity to learn how to become more articulate and confident in both their speaking and writing.

Initiated classroom discussion must, however, have purpose – because without purpose, the discussion will lose value and creates disengagement whilst increasing the likelihood of off-topic chat.

As teachers, this is naturally concerning in terms of both behaviour management and the time constraints we're under within our lessons. Creating opportunities for intentional collaborative talk in the classroom can, however, be extremely valuable when anchored to clear and explicit learning goals.

Timing talk

Once the learning goals behind the collaborative talk are established, it's important to consider timing. Peer discussion during the initial stages of a task can be a useful tool for activating prior knowledge and exploring emerging ideas.

By essentially 'thinking out loud', learners are given the chance to conceptualise and translate abstract ideas into their own words.

What's more, this 'visible thinking' will allow teachers to ascertain any potential barriers and challenges ahead of a task by exposing misconceptions early on.

Peer talk essentially lowers the threshold for participation, when compared to traditional whole-class discussion, in turn providing a safer and more comfortable space in which learners can share their tentative ideas. Often, the goal for peer talk is metacognitive – when students articulate the steps in their thinking, we encourage self-regulation. And when students are exposed to the thought process of their peers, they have the chance to hear how others would approach the same problem.

Being clear as to the intention behind the discussion will therefore allow you to better consider when and where in the lesson the activity is likely to hold the most value for learners.

Explicit teaching of how to talk

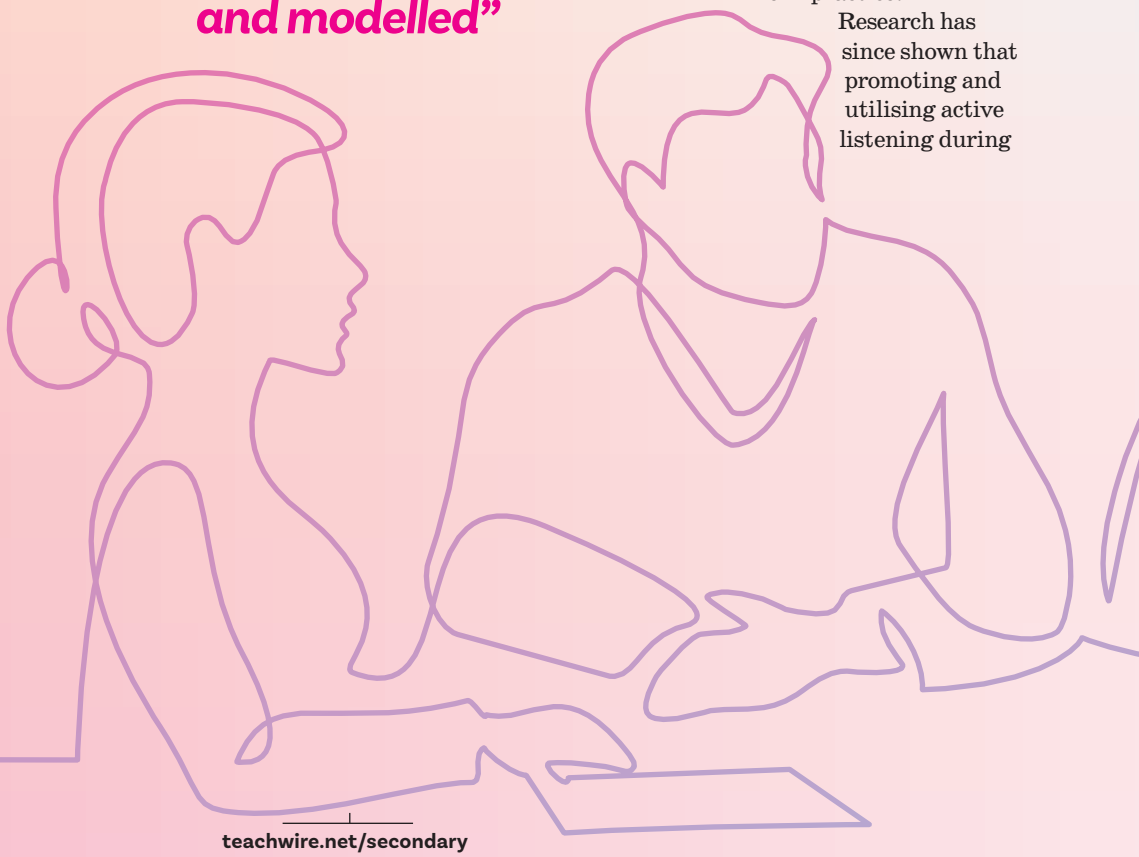
The threat of classroom talk must be low for its effectiveness to be high, since students won't engage if the environment feels threatening and uncomfortable. As we know, many students can struggle with the thought of speaking in front of the class, with even seemingly confident pupils liable to feel some fear and anxiety.

Before introducing a 'talk to your partner' (TTYP) activity, model the expectations of this type of talk by conducting an example interaction with a student in the class. You could show a less effective example (one-word answers, or an off-topic conversation), followed by an effective example (using full sentences, providing justifications for answers). Then ask your class which was more effective and why.

As observed by Neil Mercer in 2008, in the book *Exploring Talk in School,* the unspoken rules of talk must be made explicit, with pupils needing to develop shared 'rules' for group talk so they can collaborate. I've often found that displaying talk 'rules' or 'moves' on the board can serve as visible expectations of what students' collaborative talk (and listening) should look like in practice.

Research has since shown that promoting and utilising active listening during

"Similar to writing, effective talk must be explicitly taught and modelled"



peer-to-peer classroom conversations can help students feel more confident in expressing themselves, and ultimately strengthen their perceptions of the educational experience.

Structured discussion of this sort can be very effective when used with small groups, especially if the members of said groups are each given a specific discussion 'role'. The oracy framework progression tool produced by the education charity Voice 21, for example (see tinyurl.com/ts152-CT1), sets out clear 'talk tactics' that include explicit discussion roles such as 'instigate', 'challenge' and 'summarise', with sentence frames to support.

Students can be allocated a specific role in the conversation, or else could choose which tactic they want to use and practise delivering their thoughts and ideas using this method. The roles themselves can vary, meaning that tactics can be allocated based on a student's level of confidence or language acquisition.

If a student assumes the role of 'summariser', for instance, the focus will be on their ability to listen to and absorb the suggestions being presented by their peers, with less pressure on them to help formulate initial ideas.

Distinctions between types of talk

A cornerstone in the development of my own pedagogy as an educator came when I first learned about the distinctions between types of talk. In 1976, Douglas Barnes explained the difference between 'exploratory talk' and 'presentational talk'. The former sees a student essentially thinking out loud through pair or group discussion – formulating their ideas without an audience, so to speak. The latter entails a student voicing their ideas in front of the whole class – this time *with* an audience, of course.

With a traditional TTYP activity, we might give students a topic to talk about with their partner for 30 to 60 seconds, before then calling upon a handful of learners to share the ideas they've discussed. In this way, we're often asking students to transition between two different types of talk without hesitation.

Yet are we providing the students with enough scaffold and support to be able to do so? We could, for example, display verbal sentence starters help to frame students' thinking, as well as their articulation.

By essentially scaffolding the students' exploratory talk, we'd be supporting their transitions to presentational talk.

Ways of scaffolding classroom talk

Similar to writing, effective talk must be explicitly taught and modelled. Writing frames and sentence starters are both tried and trusted methods that many of us will use to support our learners in articulating their ideas in written form – so how can we provide effective scaffolding for collaborative talk?

It's important to note that many of our students face barriers to conversation, which can include their level of confidence, having English as an additional language and their general level of articulacy.

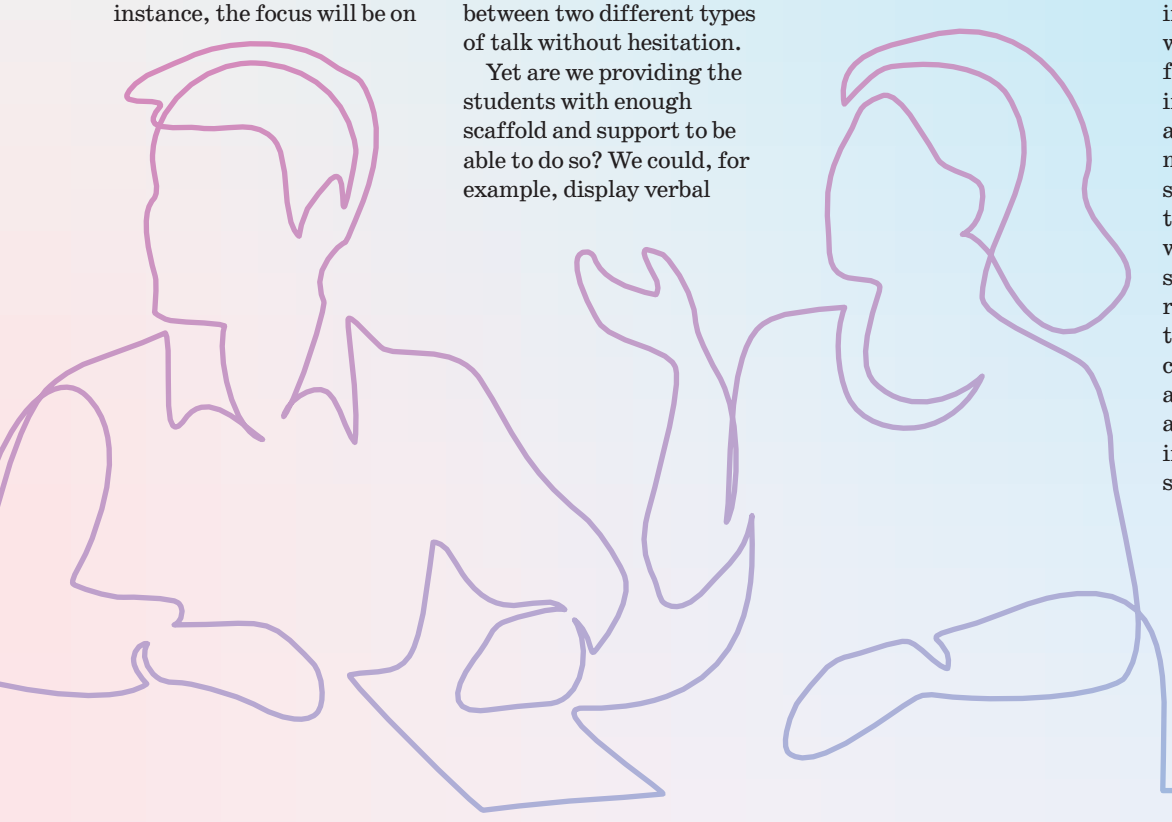
Creating a framework where all students are encouraged and supported to vocalise their ideas is therefore fundamental.

Sometimes, however, the main barrier can be a student's ability to actually form an opinion or idea, let alone communicate it. When faced with this, I'll opt to use a resource that visually illustrates the topic of discussion, with pre-populated differing viewpoints shown in a series of speech bubbles. I'll then encourage students to choose which viewpoints or opinions they agree with, or simply like the most and use that as a platform to promote their own thinking.

The additional benefit here is the modelling of differing viewpoints, in a way that promotes the value of healthy discussion and structuring debate.

Over time, students' understanding will widen as they're supported in acknowledging perspectives they may not have previously considered themselves. Students who may struggle to form an opinion are thus encouraged to base their opinion on one of those provided, and then justify it.

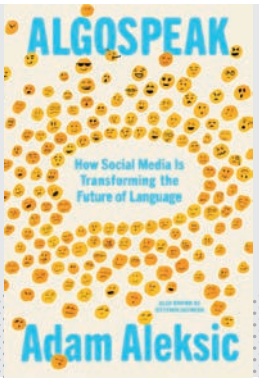
You're more likely to succeed in creating a visible and easily identifiable set of benchmark expectations for collaborative talk when they're consistently implemented across the wider school. If we're explicit from the outset about our intended purpose for talk and why we value it; if we can meet the challenge of students' confidence in talking by modelling the talk we want to see; and if we can scaffold their attempts and ramp up the opportunities they have to talk – then we can empower their voices, and ultimately work to address those inherent inequalities that many students currently face.

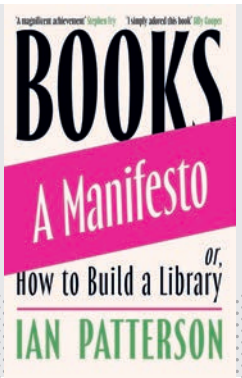


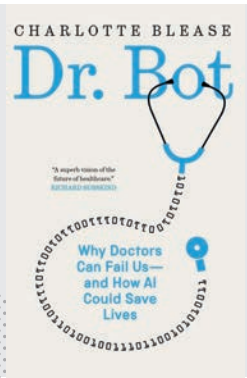
Charlotte Lander is a teacher of English and psychology, and specialist in Talk for Learning

Off the Shelves

Brilliant titles for you and your students to explore







Algospeak – How Social Media is Transforming the Future of Language

(Adam Aleksic, Ebury, £22)

The 'algo' of the title, of course, refers to the 'algorithms' that govern social media platforms and power efforts at regulating (or indeed censoring) the internet. They work by latching on to certain words and phrases, prompting internet users to respond by deliberately using alternative words or misspellings. The algorithms are eventually adjusted to compensate, resulting in what Aleksic likens to a game of virtual 'whack-a-mole'. From a linguistic point of view, at least, it's a fascinating process that neatly demonstrates how language evolves and adjusts according to changes in culture. This is a book that can offer a useful guide to how internet trends develop, provide a few handy hints on how to make content go viral, and perhaps even help you better understand the way your students talk...

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

bit.ly/Eclecticism

Books – A Manifesto: Or, How to Build a Library

(Ian Patterson, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £20)

This detailed account of how Patterson went about assembling and curating an extensive home library describes a scenario that will lie outside of most people's experiences (or even aspirations). It does, however, serve as a wonderful excuse for this book's wide-ranging discussions of books, authors, the process of understanding poetry, the challenges facing translators and the perennial clash between tradition and innovation. What emerges is a compelling read that's bound to make even the most well-read among us feel somewhat under-educated. The ease with which Patterson weaves together considerations of seemingly disparate works is impressive to behold, though perhaps the book's main appeal is as a starting point for literary exploration. Were I an English teacher, I'd be delving into it frequently to gain inspiration and pick up all manner of fascinating background information for my students. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

Dr Bot - Why Doctors Can Fail Us–and How AI Could Save Lives

(Charlotte Blease, YUP, £18.99)

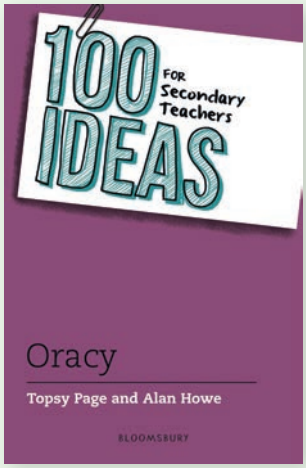
For many working in the education profession, their considerations of AI's pros and cons will be largely centred on how it can enable instances of student plagiarism, or potentially reduce the burden of teachers' admin. In the comprehensive and highly readable *Dr Bot,* Blease tackles a far wider range of issues, albeit some that are particularly apposite for those working in schools. Why, she posits, are doctors often loath to use AI, even when it has the capacity to be extremely helpful? She goes on to explore how some patients can be more willing to open up and share personal information with AI bots than with human doctors, thus enabling medical staff to get an unfiltered picture of what's actually going on in patients' lives. Could this form of triage be an approach we might one day see echoed in schools?The resulting impact on test results could certainly be interesting...

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

ON THE RADAR

100 Ideas for Secondary Teachers: Oracy

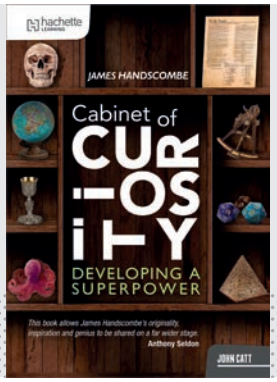
(Topy Page & Alan Howe, Bloomsbury, £15)



Educators wanting to get ahead of the Curriculum and Assessment Review's call for more teaching around oracy may wish to investigate this latest entry in Bloomsbury's long-running '*100 Ideas...*' series. What these books have always done well is pack a huge array of ideas, suggestions and advice into deceptively slim tomes – sometimes accompanied by a smattering of theory, but always with a focus on practical, actionable steps conveyed in concise, brisk prose perfectly suited to the needs of time-pressed teachers.

And so it goes here. Page (former assistant head, writing lead and SLE) and Howe (local authority adviser and inspector) are both associate members of Oracy Cambridge, and as knowledgable a pair of guides as you could wish for. The advice they have to offer is organised into no less than eight distinct sections, structured in such a way that there really is something for everyone.

For teachers needing a steer on how to start incorporating oracy into their lessons, there's a generous selection of engaging activities and games to be found throughout the book. Those keen to tackle more advanced challenges can pick up some useful tips on exploring accents, dialects and code switching, while everyone else will find much of interest within the sections dedicated to managing classroom talk, and how oracy can be usefully applied across a whole range of different subject areas.



Cabinet of Curiosity – Developing a Superpower

(James Handscombe, Hachette, £16)

Writing as someone who has successfully employed curiosity in my teaching of economics and computing, I'm very much in favour of the argument at the heart of this book – that school life ought to consist of far more than just a utilitarian pursuit of exam grades over all other considerations. Handscombe proceeds to grapple with a dizzyingly broad set of topics, including British and American politics, art appreciation and even 'quantum chromodynamics'. The book does, however, come accompanied by a toolkit and explanatory notes for teachers, which should serve as a good starting point for any educators wanting to introduce a curiosity-based element to their courses. The kind of approaches the book proposes would need to be taken seriously by SLTs, parents and students alike if they're to work, which may pose a challenge – but it would be a challenge worth persevering with.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

Kind Leadership – Leading schools with empathy, honesty and impact

(Joanna Povall, Crown House Publishing, £16.99)

Povall's central argument in this book is that kindness, in the context of school leadership, doesn't equate to 'weakness', but is a way of operating that makes schools stronger, more responsive and more accountable. She presents her case via a series of engaging personal recollections and reflections, highlighting real-world leadership situations both good and bad, and there's a mnemonic takeaway too – in this case, a 'mindset' for leaders that Povall calls 'CHASE Kindness' (incorporating Communication, Honesty, Accountability, Self-esteem and Ego). Povall freely admits, with some disarming honesty herself, that the information she's conveying here is more a reformulation of things her readers will know already than a groundbreaking treatise – but then, given the recent rise in aggressive management methods among the leadership class, plus the bellicose pronouncements by certain world leaders of late, Povall's message is important, welcome and timely.

Meet the author

JOANNA POVALL

Why write this particular book, and why write it now?

I've long felt strongly that kindness is something very much needed in leadership. That said, I'm not a naturally kind person – I had to learn how to be kind through my leadership, and by seeing what worked and what didn't. I'd been writing down my thoughts about kindness and leadership for some time when a speaking opportunity at the annual Council of British International Schools Conference came up. I'd been weighing up whether to submit a manuscript, and when the session – titled 'Don't Mistake My Kindness for Weakness', after a quote by Al Capone – was well received, I sent the first draft off and things moved on from there.

In the book you posit a leadership model based on empathy, kind communication and accountability – but aren't such attributes often 'filtered out' during the selection process for leadership roles?

As an NQT in the mid 90s, the first school I worked in sent me on an assertiveness training course. It fascinates me now that that's what people thought was needed – but as I've got older, I've come to realise that's not what we need at all.

Yes, leaders require a certain amount of self-esteem and ego, but they must be able to draw on humanity and compassion as well. Every day in school you have people's *lives* in your hands – the students', your colleagues' – which is a huge responsibility.

Is the leadership culture you'd like to see one that will entail changes in how individual leaders behave, or one that will require some degree of wider systemic change?

A bit of both – changes at the personal level to start with, but in the hope that policymakers and officials start paying attention. We need to see change, and fast, because teaching's in crisis, especially with respect to recruitment.

We spend so much time teaching teachers how to support children, but rarely apply the same awareness and sensitivities to our interactions with staff and colleagues. Nowadays, we wouldn't single a child out and tell the class '*You're all staying behind because of what this child did*' – yet I've sat in staff meetings where that's happened.

Everybody knows that we leaders need to communicate clearly, honestly and with humanity, be accountable and look after our self-esteem and that of our staff. It's not a new message, but I'd like for people to read the book and think, '*I agree – so what am I doing about it?*'

Joanna Povall is the Principal of Wales International School, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Q&A

Safeguard their independence

Richard Weremiuk, founder of TrackTrail®, shares how GPS tracking can enhance safety and wellbeing during Duke of Edinburgh expeditions...

30 SECOND BRIEFING

TrackTrail® provides teachers with confidence and peace of mind during Duke of Edinburgh expeditions. The system's real-time GPS tracking reduces safeguarding risks in remote areas where mobile phones typically fail, enabling rapid emergency response whilst preserving the student independence that makes Duke of Edinburgh transformative.

Why is safeguarding Duke of Edinburgh students so challenging?

Students face genuine risks on expeditions – getting lost in remote terrain, injuries far from help, severe weather in exposed areas – but traditional safeguarding responses compromise the independence that Duke of Edinburgh champions. Closer supervision reduces autonomy. Mobile phones often lack signal in expedition areas. Frequent check-ins interrupt the wilderness experience. When a group is late, teachers managing these risks don't know if groups are lost, injured or simply dawdling.

How does TrackTrail® help when students get lost on expeditions?

TrackTrail® shows exact locations every few minutes, even where mobile phones typically fail. When groups go off-route, you know immediately. You can intercept them, or monitor as they self-correct, intervening only when necessary. There is no guesswork around deciding whether to deploy search parties. After the expedition, you can replay the breadcrumb trail during debriefs and show students precisely where their navigation went wrong, thus building skills for future expeditions.

How does GPS tracking help with injury response?

In remote areas, finding injured students quickly is critical. Without tracking, you're reliant on the group's ability to describe their location. TrackTrail® provides the exact grid references that emergency services need, improving response times dramatically. Our devices include SOS buttons for alerting up to three nominated contacts. You can assess whether situations require an emergency response or can be managed internally, while simultaneously tracking other groups to ensure the incident doesn't cascade.

Can't schools just use students' mobile phones for tracking?

Expedition areas often lack consistent mobile coverage where you need it most, and phone batteries drain quicker with GPS enabled. Phone access also undermines independence. Students may contact parents instead of problem-solving, or use mapping apps rather than learning navigation skills. TrackTrail® devices run for up to a week, work anywhere and remain invisible to the student experience. Students navigate using traditional skills whilst you maintain oversight remotely.

Contact:
01905 570 880 | sales@tracktrail.co.uk

ABOUT US:
TrackTrail® provides GPS tracking for Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, off-site activities, and school trips.

How can schools implement TrackTrail® during expeditions?

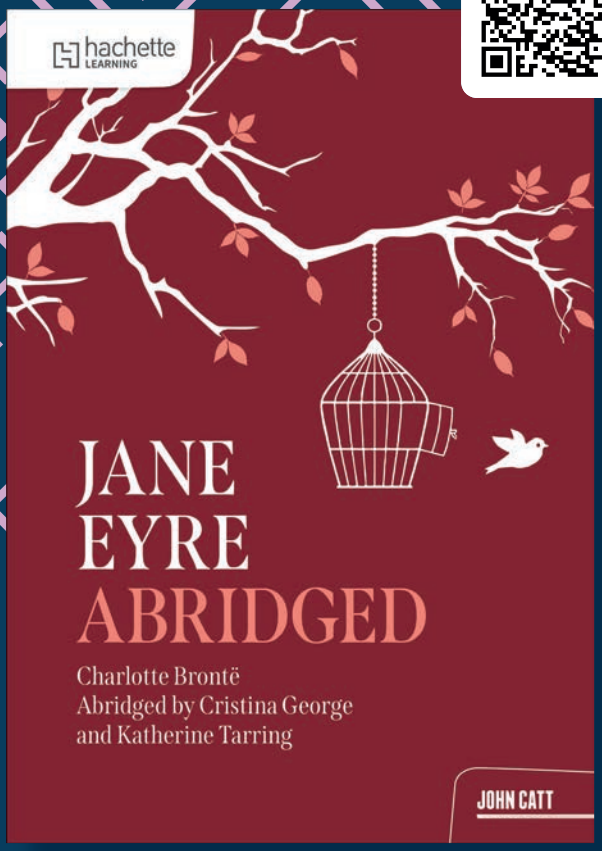
Each group carries one tracker on a rucksack. Staff access a web-based map that shows all group locations in real time – meaning no software downloads and compatibility with any device. You can see who's on-route, who's struggling and where best to position staff. Schools can hire trackers from £15 per device for weekend expeditions, or purchase them outright for £125 each.

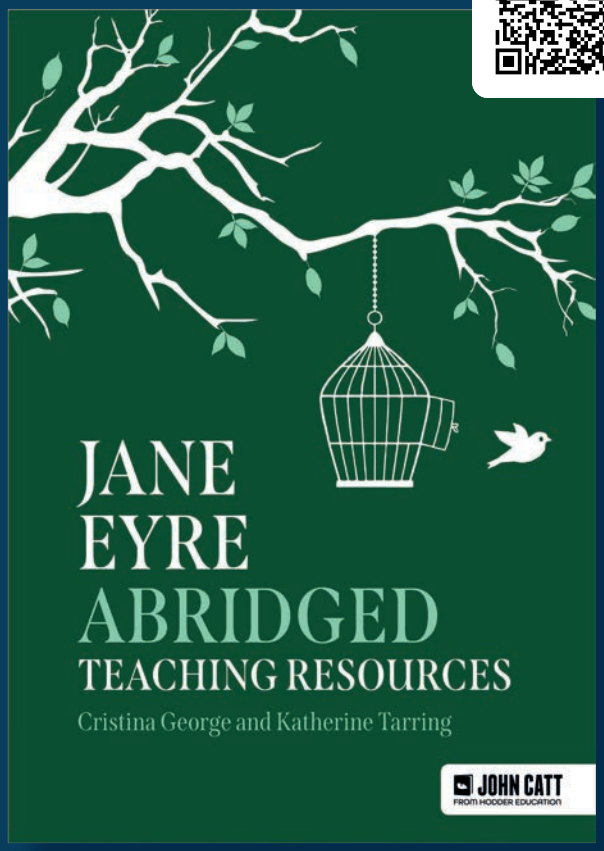
What's the difference?

+ Real-time tracking provides teacher confidence and parental peace of mind during Duke of Edinburgh expeditions
+ Precise emergency coordinates and SOS alerts enable rapid response, reducing risk and improving student safety
+ Monitor student locations remotely and eliminate guesswork, whilst preserving the independence that Duke of Edinburgh tasks require

Richard Weremiuk is the founder of TrackTrail®

Scan the QR codes to learn more





Access the world of Charlotte Brontë's enduring classic, *Jane Eyre*, like never before with this sensitively abridged edition.

Brontë's rich language and powerful style is here preserved in a sensitive abridgement of this much-loved and enduring tale. This concise and fast-paced form – the length of the average modern YA novel – is designed to allow students to experience the narrative arc of the full novel in an accessible introduction to nineteenth-century literature.

With the accompanying **Jane Eyre Abridged: Teaching Resources**, available to purchase as a downloadable PDF, the authors provide English departments with everything they need to deliver the text.

hachettelearning.com/english/jane-eyre-abridged

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RSHE | CROSS-CURRICULAR | TIMETABLING

Less cringe, MORE HINGE

Ed Carlin makes his case for why teaching RSHE via a series of discrete lessons might not be the best approach...

Two years on from the rollout of the mandatory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum, the verdict in many schools feels mixed. Depending on who you ask, it's either a long overdue moral roadmap for a generation that's done much of their growing up online, or a weekly endurance test involving awkward silences, suppressed giggles and a collective sense among teenagers of 'Here we go again…'

I would argue that the content of RSHE isn't the problem. If anything, that's actually spot on. The issues lie with its delivery.

At a time when young people are navigating unprecedented levels of online misinformation, extremism and hypersexualised content, while also absorbing conflicting value systems at home and on social media, RSHE isn't just useful – it's essential. For many students, school may well be the only consistent, grounded and safe environment in which they can explore what it means to be a decent human being, a respectful partner and a responsible citizen.

Yet by ring-fencing this learning into a once-a-week standalone lesson, we may be undermining the very impact we hope the curriculum will have.

Necessary, timely, non-negotiable

Let's be absolutely clear from the outset – RSHE matters. Young people today aren't growing up in a moral vacuum, they're growing up in a moral maelstrom. Online spaces bombard them with extreme views, distorted ideas of relationships, rigid gender stereotypes, misogyny, racism, conspiracy theories and algorithm-fuelled outrage.

Some will encounter further, equally problematic messages in the family home, whether through prejudice, neglect or rigid belief systems that go unchallenged.

Within this context, schools can't afford to retreat into purely academic instruction and hope that the 'values' internalised by students somehow take care of themselves. RSHE instead offers a structured opportunity for students to properly reflect, question, challenge and develop accountability. It presents language with which they can think about and discuss matters of consent, respect, responsibility, empathy and self-awareness.

Done well, RSHE teaching has the potential to mitigate many of the social problems we'll often wring our hands over later – from abusive relationships and intolerance, to civic disengagement and lack of personal responsibility. So no – I'm not presenting a case for scrapping RSHE altogether, or even watering it down. Quite the opposite.

The problem is that we've been treating it as a box to be ticked, rather than as a message that needs to be meaningfully embedded.

The once-a-week problem

Anyone who's ever taught RSHE before knows the kind of classroom atmosphere such lessons entail. Picture the scene – it's period 3 on a Thursday, and the chairs are all arranged in a circle because 'the training said so'. A PowerPoint presentation is displayed at the front, with the words 'healthy relationships' or 'sexual consent'.

30 adolescents then slump into those seats. Some stare at the ceiling. Some smirk. Some brace themselves for imminent embarrassment.

And hovering over it all is the unspoken assumption that an 'out-of-touch grown-up' is about to tell them how to behave.

There's a painful irony at play here. These are arguably among the most important conversations we want young people to engage with, and yet we continue to deliver them in a format that practically guarantees resistance.

Teenagers are exquisitely sensitive to anything that feels forced, artificial or patronising. Ring-fencing RSHE into a standalone lesson sends out a clear message – that this is awkward, that it's something separate, that this isn't real

learning. It becomes something to endure, rather than engage with.

We'd never dream of trying to teach literacy like this, or numeracy, or scientific thinking. Nevertheless, we somehow seem to persist in isolating our students' moral, social and relational learning away from everything else, only to then act surprised when those students treat the lessons in question as cringe-worthy.

Stop isolating, start embedding

What if the answer were not to hold more RSHE lessons, but rather less obvious ones? Imagine if relationships were explored through English literature – the power dynamics of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, the coercion portrayed in *An Inspector Calls*, or the emotional manipulation that features in any number of modern novels. Suddenly, the conversation becomes less about the students, but about characters. This distance allows for more honesty, giving way to discussions that feel safer, richer and more authentic.

Sex education is naturally rooted in biology and grounded in anatomy, of course. Reproduction, sexual health, evidence – once stripped of distracting embarrassment, these topics can reframed as areas of knowledge, rather than spectacle.

Environmental responsibility already sits comfortably within geography. Citizenship, democracy and social responsibility are already woven into history and modern studies, where students can interrogate the real consequences of apathy, prejudice and extremism.

Under this model, RSHE can cease being a lesson and start becoming a lens.

The same essential content is being covered, only now it's contextualised, normalised and taken seriously, because it lives inside subjects that students already respect. Those awkward giggles will quickly fade when the conversations being had feel purposeful. That 'cringe factor' will swiftly melt away once students no longer feel like they're getting a lecture on how to live.

Instead, the messages they receive will feel like learning.

LIVED EXPERIENCES

A core component of RSHE involves supporting children in negotiating challenges to their wellbeing – an area in which The Children's Society ongoing survey work can provide some useful and instructive context...

Since 2009, The Children's Society has regularly produced its Good Childhood Report to gauge children and young people's levels of subjective wellbeing over time, and highlight any trends and concerns regarding key areas of their daily habits and lifestyles. So what does The Good Childhood Report 2025 tell us about how children and young people see their lives currently?

Based on a series of consultations carried out nationwide with groups of with children and young people, and professionals working with those groups, the overall picture presented is one of a continued general decline in children's self-reported wellbeing since 2009. While the report's authors take care to point out that the 'majority of children and young people seem to be leading relatively happy lives', the evidence available points to a significant number being unhappy, with certain groups more likely to experience low life satisfaction than others – notably girls.

Drilling down

During the consultations, young people and professionals suggested that the lower life satisfaction reported by girls may in part be down to them contending with unrealistic beauty standards encountered via social media that exert constant pressure and expectations on how they 'should' look. Young people suggested that these feelings may be further compounded by a general expectation for girls to be more mature than boys.

Previous research carried out by The Children's Society found that for around a decade from 1994–95, the 'happiness with appearance' gender gap among 11- to 15-year-olds actually narrowed, only to open up again from the mid 2000s, eventually settling at a level last seen 20 years previously.

If the gap between girls' unhappiness with their appearance compared to boys' was broadly similar in the mid 90s and mid 2010s, conclude the report's authors, that suggests that pressures driven by social media perhaps are perhaps one of multiple factors, rather than the sole driver for the gap.

Connections and concerns

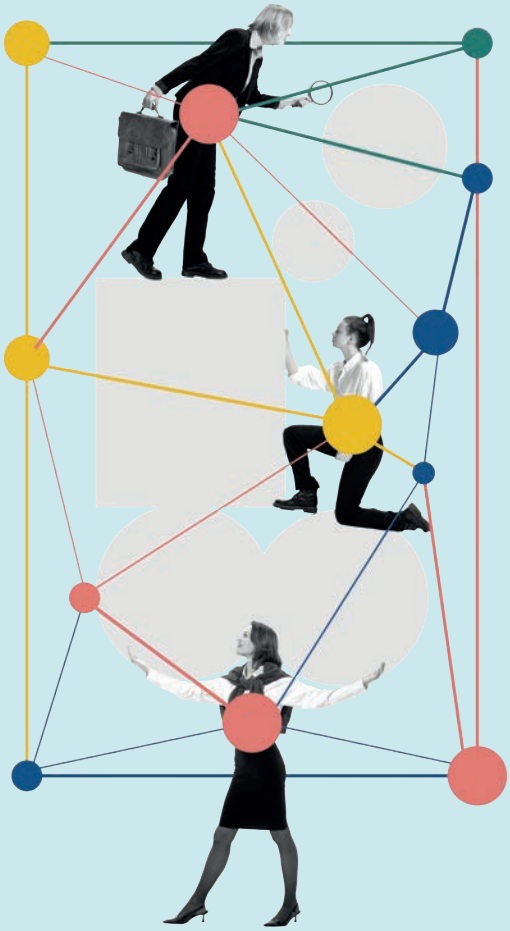
When asked specifically about how their online experiences affected their wellbeing, the young people surveyed acknowledged that social media could have a negative impact on peer group dynamics, be a vector for bullying and affect how they feel about themselves, especially their appearance.

That said, their experience of messaging negative to their wellbeing wasn't limited to online interactions. Young people expressed the view that mainstream media carried plenty of negative messaging directed against their age group, and pointed out the valuable role that social media could play in connecting them to peers with similar interests and concerns. They also identified a vicious circle arising from their increased reliance on digital interactions to attain a sense of belonging, at a time when local opportunities and spaces for them to socialise with others in person have steadily diminished.

The young people's answer to this? For digital spaces to be made safer, for adults to be more aware of both the risks and benefits to be had from digital connections, and for more opportunities to meaningfully socialise and connect with others in the real world.

The Good Childhood Report 2025 can be viewed in full by visiting childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood

> *"The content of RSHE isn't the problem; the issues lie with its delivery"*



Authenticity over compliance

A striking contradiction within education is that we repeatedly claim to understand young people, yet persist in designing experiences that completely ignore what they're clearly telling us through their behaviour.

Teenagers value authenticity and respond to relevance. They recoil from anything that feels performative or tokenistic, but when it comes to RSHE, we often default to compliance: Have we delivered the lesson? Have we covered the slide? Have we met the statutory requirement?

But education isn't about coverage, it's about impact. If the goal of RSHE is to help young people reflect on themselves, develop responsibility and challenge harmful beliefs, then its presentation is as important as its content. A curriculum that's technically delivered well, but emotionally dismissed by those for whom it's intended simply won't succeed, however well-intentioned it might be.

By embedding RSHE across subjects, however, we can move away from telling students what to think, and towards instead *inviting* them to think. We can create multiple touchpoints for them, rather than a sole awkward weekly slot. We should respect young people enough to trust that they can engage with complex moral ideas when those ideas are presented thoughtfully.

Hinge moments

In teaching, we often talk about 'hinge moments' – those points in a lesson when students' understanding suddenly deepens and their thinking visibly shifts. RSHE lessons should be full of such moments, but too often, they consist of avoidance, discomfort and disengagement.

To be clear, though, this isn't a failure on the part of teachers, but nor is it down to young people. It's a design problem. We don't need to abandon RSHE, but rather reimagine it.

Instead of asking, 'How can we fit this into a timetable?' we should be asking, 'Where does this naturally belong?' Rather than isolating the most sensitive topics of adolescence into their own quarantined teaching slot, we should be looking integrate them across the wider intellectual life of the school.

Because if we truly believe that RSHE content is an essential part of what students should be learning – and I do – then it deserves more than a once weekly lesson that students quickly lapse into switching off from. Young people are already learning plenty about relationships, sex, power and values every day of their lives. What we need to ask ourselves is whether schools want to be part of that education in a meaningful way, or simply tick the box and hope for the best.

Want less cringe and more hinge? Then stop isolating your RSHE messages and start embedding them in places where they can actually be heard.

Ed Carlin is a deputy headteacher at a Scottish secondary school, having previously held teaching roles at schools in Northern Ireland and England

MAKING DO WITHOUT SOCIALS

Three teenagers share their thoughts on the likely impact of making schools an entirely social media-free zone...

Michela, 17, Dublin

Ireland's proposed social media ban for under 16s comes from a place of concern, but as a 17-year old-who uses social media every day, I see how much good it can actually do.

For a lot of teenagers, social media isn't just about trends or wasting time; it's where we can learn about mental health, find people who understand what we're going through, and feel less alone.

Taking social media away doesn't take away the problems we deal with in school, at home or in our heads. It just takes away one of the few places where we feel can connect with people our age all across the world.

Eva, 17, London

I believe a phone ban in schools would change how students stay connected during the day, and could lead to feelings of isolation at first.

That said, a phone ban may also encourage young people to build their communication skills, reduce distractions in lessons and improve students' concentration levels.

I don't believe a phone ban alone would instantly improve students' wellbeing – but if introduced with a clearly communicated support plan, it could have real benefits.

Emily, 15, Manchester

Social media is a really important part of how I speak with my friends and manage school life. I also use social media to help me revise, as I struggle in lessons due to my autism. If a social media ban happens it will severely impact my grades in education, and also how I interact with the world.

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Shields, not filters

Rob Wraith considers the current situation with respect to schools' online safeguarding responsibilities, and what's caused them to change in recent years...

The modern digital landscape has effectively transformed the school classroom from a purely physical space into something more akin to a hybrid environment, where boundaries between the 'school work' and 'online activity' have effectively become erased.

Consequently, educators and administrators are now required to understand and routinely implement a range of enhanced safeguarding protocols.

No more walled gardens

While the early 2020s were characterised by a frantic scramble to set up remote learning provision, schools and colleges have since entered into a more proactive and sophisticated era of digital delivery and defence.

Safeguarding is now no longer a peripheral IT concern. Instead, online safety has become a core pillar of the educational experience, embedded into every lesson plan and pastoral strategy. Given the increasing centrality of online services, platforms and content to teachers' lesson delivery, schools have also needed to finally moved beyond traditional 'walled garden' approaches.

For years, online safety was synonymous with aggressive web filtering and crude blocking of virtually all access to popular social media platforms and controversial search terms. Over time, however, educators have come to realise that such blunt restrictions can often backfire, leaving students unable to access resources that could potentially support their learning and understanding.

Digital literacy

The latter-day approach adopted by most schools involves the use of intelligent monitoring software to oversee student behaviour in real time. These solutions don't simply block content outright, but rather collect data and analyse intent. If a student repeatedly searches for terms relating to self-harm or extremist ideologies, these systems can flag said behaviour and report it to appropriate safeguarding teams, enabling human intervention before what may have started as digital curiosity turns into a physical crisis.

The wider education curriculum has also undergone something of a radical transformation in response to the rise of generative AI and synthetic media, with digital literacy increasingly considered to be of similar importance to traditional literacy or numeracy. Schools and educators have pivoted to teaching online safety lessons that deconstruct the mechanics of the internet and how digital content is produced and propagated.

Students are taught how algorithms function; how 'deep-fake' technologies can be used for the purposes of cyberbullying, and how to verify the authenticity of different sources in an age of widespread disinformation.

We've seen a shift in overall focus – from '*don't look at this*' to '*think about **why** you are seeing this*'. Schools are now setting about the task of equipping children with permanent psychological shields, rather than temporary digital filters.

The four Cs

Then there are the 'four Cs' of online safety that schools have to incorporate – 'Content', 'Contact', 'Conduct' and 'Commerce'). These are fast becoming the guiding framework for schools' online policies, but the definitions contained within them have, and will continue to expand.

Under 'Conduct', for example, schools have found themselves dealing with the increasingly complex issue of imagery, where current digital safeguarding practices emphasise both the long-term consequences of one's digital footprint, as well as the importance of legal literacy. 'Commerce' has gained heightened prominence in the wake of gambling-adjacent mechanics appearing inside video games – which can include loot boxes, in-game currencies and virtual item trading – along with the risks of addiction that these can entail.

Through this sustained culture of vigilance, schools have been able remain places of safety not just within their physical walls, but from the digital spaces students inhabit every day. At its heart, modern online safeguarding no longer revolves around the impossible task of eliminating *all* online risk. Schools recognise that they can't shield learners from every potential harm they may encounter online, and have instead shifted their focus towards cultivating students' digital resilience.

This means helping young people think more critically about the things they're seeing online; questioning where their information is coming from, rather than simply accepting it at face value; and responding with emotional awareness when faced with challenging or harmful content.

As education continues to change and evolve in more directions than ever – who knows, we may yet see a breakthrough for immersive technologies such as Virtual Reality and Metaverse-style environments – this emphasis on resilience over setting restrictions will become the most vital form of safeguarding that students carry with them into those digital spaces.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Rob Wraith is head of learning technology and digital learning at NCG – a group of seven colleges across the UK; for more information, visit ncgrp.co.uk

"They're all watching the news"

To what extent has the increasingly volatile public discourse around matters of immigration made life harder for citizenship teachers? We hear from subject specialist **Helen Blachford**...

Helen Blachford is curriculum leader of citizenship and PSHE at Priory School, Southsea, Trust Subject Director of Personal Development for the Bohunt Education Trust, and Chair of Trustees at the Association for Citizenship Teaching.

What are the most challenging topics for citizenship teachers to navigate in class?

Helen Blachford: There are the different political stances that people can take on certain issues – such as immigration, for example. Another would be the growth of different political parties and how they change over time in response to the broader political narrative. Also, the media's part in that, and how it can result in disinformation – this is a huge issue that we've needed to help our students navigate and counter.

Currently, our students are interested in talking about what's going on with the Epstein files, the challenges our Prime Minister has faced within his own party as a result, and how that story's going to play out in the long term. They're all watching the news – albeit in very different ways to how I would have done when I was their age.

The way news now comes at us constantly, rather than being 'contained' in newspapers and TV bulletins, must make the teaching citizenship topics more complex than ever. How do you discuss contentious topics in class when students will likely have their own, very particular, feelings about them?

I ensure that our classroom discussions are firmly rooted in talk of legislation, institutions, evidence and such, and I set clear expectations around the kind of respectful dialogue we need to be engaging in. Wherever possible, I try to explicitly separate out the *understanding* of the issues we discuss from the *endorsement* of them.

There's a strong tradition in citizenship of teaching through inquiry. I want my students to be critically engaged, and for them to be critical thinkers, so I'll always ask that they provide evidence for any claims they make, and seek evidence for any claims they hear.

Immigration is one of those key areas for unpicking myths and countering them with factual information gathered from reliable sources. As a teacher, I have a duty to promote British Values, so everything I do is grounded within the democratic principles that are core to citizenship.

Our job is to teach students about democracy, the rule of law, and international frameworks such as the Human Rights Act, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 Refugee Convention and whatever else.

That's the bread and butter of my curriculum.

"Citizenship isn't about telling students 'what to think' about immigration policy; it's about giving them tools to evaluate whether arguments are legally sound"

THE REVIEW PROCESS

Our REVIEW model sees students go through a specific process of verifying information:

Reputation – What do we know about the outlet, channel or account, and who is the information aimed at?

Evidence – What supporting facts, figures and sources does the information cite?

Verification – Has the same information been reported or posted about elsewhere?

Intent – Why might the outlet, channel or account be posting this particular information?

Emotions – Does the manner in which information is presented try to make us feel a certain way?

Weighing up – Based on the above, do we ultimately think that the information is factually accurate?

Citizenship isn't about telling students 'what to think' about immigration policy; it's about giving them the tools to evaluate whether arguments are legally sound, evidence-based and consistent with our democratic principles.

The way in which a small number of voices – or even just one prominent voice – can now rapidly transform the popular narrative around a given issue must make it harder to respond when students arrive in class with certain perspectives...

When dealing with difficult topics, the actual pedagogy involved won't affect how I will deal with any subsequent challenging conversations.

As a teacher, it is okay to sometimes say '*I don't know the answer to that at the moment,*' when asked about an issue we're unfamiliar with, and to proceed to do our own research, ahead of having a conversation later with some factual evidence to hand.

When doing that, though, it's vital to actually have that discussion. If students ask you about something you're unsure of, don't leave it – because if you do, they'll look elsewhere for answers. Citizenship teachers can sometimes find themselves being asked about events and developments that took place the previous night, which the kids will have seen but you won't. In those instances, it's important to educate yourself first, before commencing on any classroom discussion.

What would be your response to the accusation that citizenship teachers – and potentially the subject as a whole – can exhibit an inherent 'bias' towards certain views or policy positions that's at odds with the need for teachers to remain politically neutral?

I've rarely encountered those kinds of attitudes – partly, I suspect, because of the culture we've carefully created among our students and through the work I've performed across our trust. We have a shared curriculum across our schools, as well as combined teacher training and CPD opportunities.

One of our core aims is to help students become game changers across different subject areas – which, for me, would mean developing active citizens who are engaged, and who want to vote and participate in their democracy and bring about change – whether that's lobbying for the introduction of a new law, or campaigning on behalf of others.

I think there can be a lack of understanding as to what our curriculum actually is, and what we're trying to do within that, which may lead to those concerns. My job isn't 'to be political', with a party political hat on. My job is to help my students navigate the world of information that surrounds them and make informed choices for themselves, so that they can compare different political parties and where those different parties stand on the issues they care about.

A key part of being a citizenship teacher now is giving students the tools they need to make informed decisions for themselves. Why would you *not* want to do that?

To what extent does citizenship teaching now involve equipping students with media literacy skills? Have you worked with other departments to support those efforts?

Media literacy is a huge passion of mine. I've worked frequently with the Association for Citizenship Teaching to develop teacher CPD, as well as something that we call the 'REVIEW' model, which gives students a process they can use to examine information for its accuracy [see panel].

Media literacy is one of the core units that we teach across our trust from Y8. I want to ensure our students have a shared language – we don't let them use the term 'fake news', for example, as it's been co-opted by people who use it to simply dismiss material they don't like or don't agree with.

We need to be a bit more sophisticated than that, so as much as possible, we try to use terms such as 'false news', or 'disinformation'.

I've completed training with our English teachers to ensure that use of language is consistent across classes, so that when students come to us in citizenship lessons they're already familiar with such terms.

I've also overseen further staff training on migration specifically, with humanities colleagues across the trust. We often encounter details and questions regarding immigration within geography, history and RE teaching contexts, so it's about giving those teachers the tools to have productive class conversations while armed with facts and able to deploy media literacy skills for themselves.

I've even had students query where *I've* sourced certain facts and statistics from. Having them challenge me on the information that I'm providing can admittedly be annoying on occasion(!) – but it's ultimately really encouraging to see.

GROUND RULES

At the start of the academic year I'll establish a set of ground rules with each new class and set certain classroom expectations:

- We will listen to one voice at a time
- It's okay to not agree with something someone says, but we should always challenge others' arguments respectfully
- We must not create a situation where the views that we share will cause harm or distress to somebody else
- We will try and avoid sharing details of personal stories and too much personal information about ourselves
- We should aim to build on each other's knowledge and understanding – we might not reach a consensus, but we will have gained a better understanding of other people's different viewpoints

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2 SUPPORT CURRICULUM COVERAGE

Inspectors now assess curriculum quality, alongside teaching and personal development. As well as covering the core curriculum to prepare students for GCSE exams, our provision also includes subjects like art and design, geography and history, so that students can explore other passions. Every lesson embeds digital literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving. The structured lessons and optional consolidation sessions let pupils progress academically, while regaining their confidence and wellbeing. We can also offer wellbeing and reintegration workshops, so that students can develop resilience and life skills, while enabling schools to provide clear evidence of students' holistic growth, in line with Ofsted's expectations.

3 TARGET INTERVENTIONS

Ofsted now separates attainment from curriculum quality, emphasising progress relative to each student's starting point. Academy21 identifies every pupil's strengths and gaps, and celebrates incremental achievements. Regular formative assessment, combined with tutor feedback and adaptive lesson plans help to ensure that students consolidate knowledge, regain momentum and achieve measurable outcomes. Schools can then present this evidence to inspectors to show how online AP is enabling meaningful progress, even for those learners who may have previously struggled in a mainstream environment.

4 ATTENDANCE AND BEHAVIOUR

Ofsted's framework now evaluates attendance alongside engagement and behaviour. At Academy21, we don't just measure whether students have logged into our platform or attended classes – it's critical to us that they show signs of being increasingly engaged, interested and motivated to learn, so that they can re-establish positive learning habits. All attendance and participation data is logged in real time via the Mentor Portal, allowing schools to identify patterns, celebrate even small milestones and demonstrate how AP interventions are supporting students' motivation, reintegration and readiness for continued academic success.

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5 SAFEGUARDING, INCLUSION AND OVERSIGHT

Safeguarding and inclusion are particularly critical in AP environments, where students may be more vulnerable. At Academy21, we ensure students remain safe and supported by qualified staff trained in safeguarding and child protection, with appropriate DSL oversight, and clear reporting and escalation procedures in place. Any safeguarding concerns are logged on My Concern and shared with mentors the same day, with suitable escalation routes – including referral to emergency services – if a mentor can't be contacted.

Key Points

Real-time monitoring of attendance, engagement and progress, giving schools evidence-ready insights into each student's learning journey and outcomes.

Structured live lessons support curriculum catch-up, skill development and GCSE readiness, while embedding digital literacy and critical thinking.

Tailored pastoral and reintegration workshops help students rebuild confidence, resilience and life skills beyond their academic outcomes.

Safeguarding and inclusion are integral, with trained staff, DSL oversight and immediate escalation procedures ensuring safe and accountable provision.

FRESH THINKING

Sarah Lillie Webber tells us why food technology is a subject ripe for reinvention and some novel teaching approaches...

As a new teacher stepping into the classroom after nearly 10 years of working in education pastorally, I've found myself assuming the role of a food technology teacher – a subject once dubbed 'home economics.'

It's a vital subject, but one that's somewhat fallen out of favour in recent years, having been overshadowed by the march of what are widely perceived as more 'academic' subjects. And yet, we've seen a growing society-wide fixation with healthy lifestyles, coinciding with ongoing concerns over nutrition. I firmly believe that the time has come to revisit and revitalise the teaching of cooking and nutrition in our schools.

Key foundational skills

Historically, the subject of home economics would see students taught essential life skills that included cooking, budgeting and household management. As school curricula have evolved over time, however – and educational priorities have gradually shifted more towards STEM subjects, languages and the arts – food technology has too often been relegated to the sidelines, despite being perennially popular with students.

While I wouldn't deny that focusing on academic subjects is indeed important, the degree to which they now dominate begs the question: have we overlooked some key foundational skills that are integral to our students' holistic development? At what point should we start considering the 70 years (or more) of life that our students will live once they leave our classrooms for the last time?

The growing awareness of the obesity crisis, diet-related health issues and effects of processed foods on wellbeing underscore the urgent need to reintroduce and bolster the importance of nutrition within our educational framework.

> *"There are myriad benefits to teaching cooking in schools that extend far beyond the kitchen"*

We must empower our students to not just survive, but thrive in today's diverse world. And a mastery of food preparation and nutrition can play a key part in this.

Given the worrying statistics concerning childhood obesity, diabetes and other diet-related diseases, our focus ought to shift towards creating nutrition-conscious students. Lessons should be structured around understanding the information provided on food labels, mastering portion control, and recognising the importance of whole foods versus those that are processed.

Responsibility and independence

There are myriad benefits to teaching cooking in schools that extend far beyond the kitchen. Engaging students in the study of food technology can help cultivate their capacity for critical thinking, creativity and practical problem-solving skills. It also fosters a greater sense of responsibility and independence among students, enabling them to make more informed choices about their diets and lifestyles as they transition into adulthood.

Learning to cook will equip students with the tools needed to understand the relationship between food, health and the environment. Young people can gain a new appreciation for where the food they eat actually comes from, how it's prepared and the importance of sustainability in a world that's increasingly plagued by a range of complex issues, including food insecurity, climate change and industrial farming practices.

It's imperative that we arm our students with the knowledge of how to create a healthier planet through their food choices.

Culinary innovations

When considering the role of food technology within modern school curricula, though, we must do so in a way that resonates with today's students. Gone, after all, are the days of boiling cabbage and making casseroles.

Instead, a modern food tech program must be reflective of current trends and culinary innovations. I've seen this first-hand, having heard my GCSE students complain about how unfair it is that the younger students get to make sushi.

I personally envision a curriculum that blends traditional cooking techniques with contemporary approaches; one that emphasises the importance of fresh, seasonal ingredients, international cuisines and plant-based cooking.

In an era when students will enthusiastically show off their own cookie recipes and share those of others via TikTok, we can also seize the opportunity to integrate technology into our food tech classes. Beyond being mere tools for accessing information, digital platforms have the potential to enhance our culinary instruction. Imagine tasking students with developing their own meal-planning apps, or having them engage with interactive cooking tutorials.

Even with just some fairly basic video production software, students could apply themselves to creating their own cooking shows, showcasing traditional recipes from different

cultures and fostering a deeper appreciation for culinary diversity, thus opening themselves up to a world of potential new opportunities.

We could also do more to incorporate technology when examining food science and nutrition. Today's typically tech-savvy students could use a combination of apps and computer software to analyse the nutritional content of different recipes, deconstruct meals and perhaps come up healthier alternatives. This intersection of cooking and technology could form a complete educational experience that blends creativity with rigorous scientific enquiry.

Nostalgia and concern

In my reimagined food curriculum, inclusivity would play a further crucial role. We now live in a multicultural society, where food practices vary widely. By embracing diverse culinary traditions, we can teach students about nutrition from a range of cultural perspectives. Each dish tells a story, and it's important that students learn to respect and celebrate the differences that food represents.

Such an approach would not only help to build their understanding and empathy, but also do much to expand their culinary repertoire and spark their interest in trying new foods.

One of the most inspiring aspects of teaching food technology is the opportunities it affords to bridge what students learn in the classroom with their lives at home and in the wider local community. At a recent parents' evening, I found the atmosphere to be a distinct blend of nostalgia and concern. Many parents eagerly shared with me fond memories of their own food tech experiences, and wistfully reminisced about their cooking classes.

Amidst these warm stories and recollections, however, was a lot of worrying from parents who felt overwhelmed by their busy lives and the rising costs of food – '*I'd love to cook more for my family, but it just takes too much time and money...*'

Their comments highlighted for me the vital role schools can play in shaping the next generation's relationship with cooking. By teaching students that nutritious meals don't have to break the bank, or consume endless hours in the kitchen, we can empower them with practical skills and creative solutions, thus encouraging a culture of healthy cooking that's in step with modern lifestyles.

By sharing innovative meal planning strategies, and making them aware of budget-friendly ingredients and efficient cooking techniques, we can help to ensure that the joy of preparing food isn't reduced to being a cherished memory of the past, but instead becomes a vital and accessible part of family life today.

Ripples of positive change

As I embark on my journey as a food technology teacher, I remain passionate about not only imparting food preparation skills, but also igniting an enthusiasm for cooking and nutrition among my students. In a world dominated by fast food, ready meals, and growing health concerns, it's essential that we empower our students with the knowledge they'll need to make healthier choices and develop a lifelong love for cooking.

To achieve that, however, we'll need more passionate educators who are dedicated to reviving food technology in schools – especially now, when knowledge of cooking and nutrition can play a critical role in maintaining our personal health and community wellness. There's arguably never been a more crucial time than now for inspiring the next generation of food educators.

In my own teaching role, I've quickly come to see the urgent need for a renewed commitment to food education. The opportunity is there to cultivate a generation that knows the importance of nutrition, and understands how their choices can create ripples of positive change.

Who knows – we might well end up with classrooms full of budding chefs, health advocates and food scientists, all eager to whip up their own solutions to the world's culinary challenges.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Sarah Webber is a food preparation and nutrition teacher at Uplands Academy in Wadhurst, East Sussex

Lessons in money

As financial education becomes a more prominent part of the curriculum, what that looks like in practice will be down to schools, observes **George Vlachonikolis**

On 5th November 2025, the government published the final report of its Curriculum and Assessment Review, 'Building a World-Class Curriculum for All' (see tinyurl.com/ts148-NL2). One of the report's key messages was that schools should focus on the most important knowledge young people will need for both their own futures and the greater good of the country.

The report also notably brought some long-awaited attention to the area of financial education, alongside an acknowledgement that many young people still leave school without the skills needed to manage money with confidence.

The picture at primary

So what does this mean in practice? If financial education is to now be taken seriously at secondary level, what should pupils actually be taught at KS3 and KS4, and how should that learning build on what they will have already encountered in primary school?

With the curriculum remaining non-statutory, the challenge won't involve following a single prescribed model, but will instead entail designing a coherent and realistic programme that fits within existing constraints, while at the same time genuinely preparing young people for the financial realities of adult life.

So what specific changes can we expect to see? At primary level, financial education currently sits loosely across maths and non-statutory citizenship and PSHE. KS1/2 pupils have been encouraged to learn about (but not be assessed on) the purpose of money, how to manage, spend and save money, and the difference between needs and wants.

The Curriculum and Assessment Review now recommends making citizenship statutory at primary, and positioning it as the formal home for financial education, stating that, *"A statutory primary Programme of Study should also equip pupils to develop their financial literacy skills, by understanding risks, core financial concepts, responsible practice, and the use of digital tools."*

> ***"Where do pupils keep their money? Why do they save?"***

Key objectives

In secondary schools, financial education has been a compulsory part of the KS3/4 citizenship curriculum since 2014, with two main learning objectives:

KS3: The functions and uses of money; the importance and practice of budgeting; managing risk

KS4: Income and expenditure; credit and debt; insurance, savings and pensions; financial products and services; how public money is raised and spent

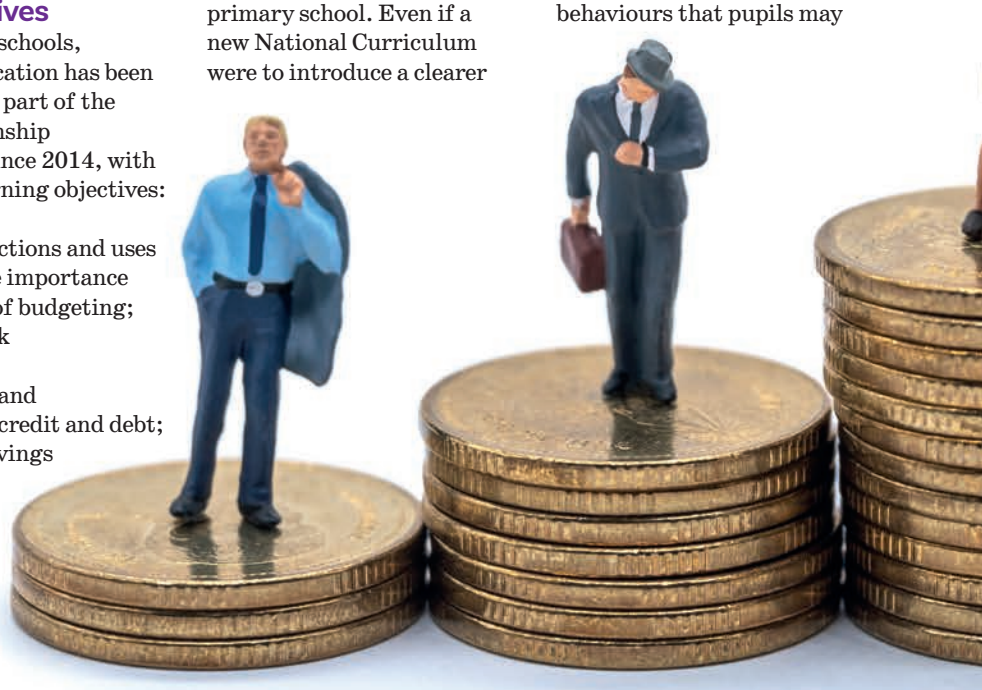
The Review makes no new specific recommendations for KS3 or KS4, however, despite acknowledging current widespread dissatisfaction among young people with respect to the financial education they receive at school. For 16- to 19-year-olds, the Review suggests only that financial literacy may be developed through 'non-qualification activity', with examples of good practice signposted, rather than specified.

Where we go from here

If we're to design an effective financial education curriculum for KS3/4, then the first thing we must acknowledge is that students may lack a secure foundation in financial knowledge from primary school. Even if a new National Curriculum were to introduce a clearer set of financial education learning objectives, it's unlikely that these would be assessed through SATs, with Ofsted inspections likely to continue judging citizenship as a whole, rather than examining financial education in isolation.

A KS3 financial education curriculum would therefore need to be deliberately designed on the basis that pupils will arrive with uneven, partial or even entirely absent prior learning about money. As a result, the start of any KS3 programme would have to function as a point of consolidation, rather than an extension of knowledge. It should provide a space where informal experiences of money can be surfaced, made explicit and then turned into shared understanding.

In practice, this would mean establishing some common language at the outset; basic concepts and everyday financial behaviours that pupils may



have already encountered at home or school. As for what those 'basic concepts' might consist of, there's no definitive list – but most Level 2 and Level 3 financial education courses (where they exist) will tend to converge on a similar set of themes (see 'Common Themes' panel).

Shared language

For me, the focus of a lesson on, say, 'saving' wouldn't necessarily start with the maths of interest rates, but rather by eliciting *pupils' existing experiences of saving*. Where do they keep their money? Why do they save? What stops them from saving?

Make this language explicit and shared. From there, you can formalise those experiences by introducing agreed concepts ('saving for goals', 'trade-offs', 'time', 'access') and common behaviours, before then moving on to more structured learning that might compare different savings products, or explicitly teach compound interest.

If KS3 is about consolidation, then KS4 could present an opportunity to tackle broader ideas.

An ambitious scheme of work might choose to cover further topics, such as:

- Payslips and tax codes
- Wider economic issues (such as inflation, tax rates and social welfare)
- Interest rates and monetary policy
- Exchange rates
- Relationship with political objectives
- Links to entrepreneurship
- The financial sector

When choosing which topics to include, schools will need to carefully consider whether they're audience-appropriate and time-relevant. Students will tend to prefer – and remember – content that's useful to them in the here and now.

A sequence of interactions

Since there's no mandate for how financial education should be delivered, schools will inevitably choose their own different approaches and priorities – hence we shouldn't assume that all KS3/4 provision needs to follow a fixed course. Instead, it can be thought of as a co-ordinated sequence of interactions that ensures students will encounter core financial concepts in a logical, cumulative order over time.

A school could, for example, choose to co-ordinate a series of events, which might include assemblies, a '£5 challenge' initiative, and a money-themed 'Focus Week' over the course of two years. Alternatively, they could ask that all subject departments embed various financial education learning objectives into their respective schemes of work, making use of cross-curricular approaches. Investment clubs and *Dragons' Den*-style enterprise clubs could then provide an extra-curricular focus.

While a formal lesson once per fortnight might be the gold standard, a more flexible approach can still achieve the same overall aims. What's clear in any case is that ownership is essential if a programme of financial education is to work, requiring someone to structure, coordinate and maintain the sequence. Without an assigned individual performing this role, even the most well-designed series of lessons and activities risks becoming fragmented.

With a clearly designated champion guiding the programme, however, students will encounter financial concepts in a coherent way, and soon develop a confidence in managing money that will serve them well into the future.

COMMON THEMES

Areas and themes that could provide a good starting point for a new programme of financial education at KS3:

- Income and wealth
- Spending
- Saving
- Protection (insurance)
- Budgeting
- Financial planning and goal-setting
- Investment
- Risk and reward
- Personal finance across the life-cycle

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FOCUS ON: SCIENCE

We weigh up whether triple science's newfound prominence should be welcomed; why teachers could soon be looking at a renaissance in practical lessons; and how to prevent tricky maths from stymieing students' progress in chemistry, physics and biology...

What are the main obstacles to students being able to engage with science, and how should we address them?

THE AGENDA:

Triple trouble?

Letting all students take triple science may prove challenging, concedes **Kit Betts-Masters** – but can we at least agree that the objective is a good one?

In November 2025, the final report of the Curriculum and Assessment Review recommended that all schools in England should work towards offering triple science at GCSE as a standard option.

The core aim is hard to argue with: that early curricular decisions shouldn't quietly limit young people's futures. Any student with the interest and ability to study science should be able to take biology, chemistry *and* physics as separate GCSEs.

Tension in practice

Fewer than a quarter of students currently take triple science. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are around half as likely to study separate sciences as their more affluent peers, with some schools not offering triple science at all. Consequently, decisions made early on in secondary school can determine not just GCSE outcomes, but whether students can access science at A Level and higher education, or pursue science-related careers.

Science teachers and leaders agree that young people shouldn't have doors closed on them before they fully understand what lies behind them. However, let's reflect for a moment on how difficult it will be to implement such a change.

When I speak to other science teachers about it, their concerns aren't ideological, but practical. They worry that they'll be tasked with teaching more content, to more students, in the same amount of time, and under the same set of staffing pressures and accountability measures.

Specialist teacher shortages continue to present issues. The government missed its recruitment target for physics teachers by 69%, and for chemistry teachers by 38%. In many schools, GCSE physics is already taught largely by non-specialists.

Schools are right to worry about being asked to stretch their already thin provision yet further. They don't want 'triple science for all' to be a good idea lacking resources.

> **"Teachers don't want 'triple science for all' to be a good idea that lacks the required support"**

What 'ability' means

Exactly what the report's authors mean by 'ability' merits closer examination The Review makes clear that any student with the interest and ability to study triple science should be able to do so. The risk, however, is that this is interpreted in ways that limit triple science to only the highest-attaining students. Alternatively, we may see students placed on a 'triple' pathway up until Y11, whereupon they're made to 'drop down' to combined science, so as to secure those grade 4s and 5s.

If a student can succeed in a separate science GCSE, even at Level 1, then they have the ability to take the course. 'Ability' doesn't mean a guaranteed high grade. It means the capacity to engage meaningfully with the curriculum and complete it.

The textbook student

There's a former student I still think about often. We were at a school where anyone who opted for triple science could take it. This student would bring an A Level physics textbook into all of his GCSE physics lessons. Not because anyone asked him to – I even told him it wasn't useful for this syllabus – but simply because it was his physics book and he was *interested*. He wasn't a top set student. Most schools would have denied him the option to pursue triple science, but he worked hard and enjoyed what he was shown and taught. He came away with a grade 3 in the subject – the best result across all of the GCSEs he'd taken.

Now consider how many students nationwide are told, implicitly or explicitly, that physics *'isn't for them'*. That they aren't *'the right kind of student'* for science.

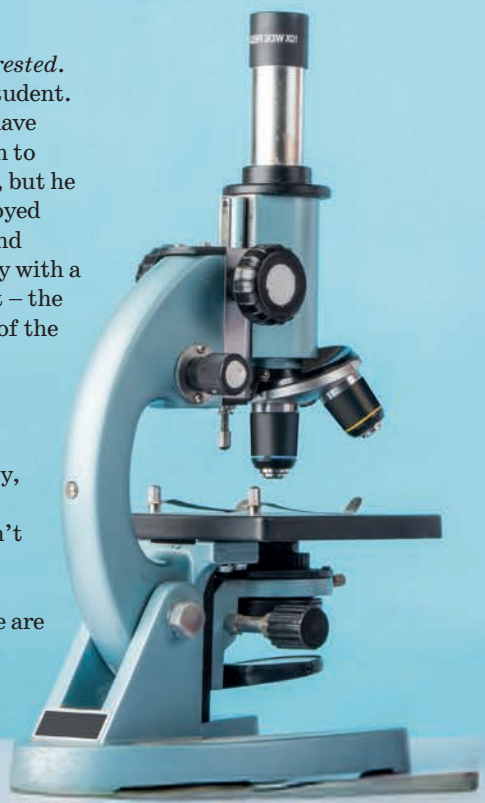
These young people are being turned away from subjects they care about, and conceivably being denied meaningful careers in science at range of levels.

That student's grade 3 wasn't a failure; it was evidence that he belonged in the room.

Equity and access

There's some genuine optimism among science teachers that a triple science guarantee could help close some long-standing equity gaps, with access to separate sciences currently varying by postcode, staffing history or whether a school feels it can 'afford' the risk.

It's important to widen access, but whether such efforts are successful depend on the details. I worry that in many schools, triple science will become the default, but that some students may be encouraged to opt out and instead favour arts, technology or vocational



subjects. Schools will be able to say that they 'offer the entitlement', but the compromises will sit with students and their families.

This approach might meet the letter of the policy, but not its spirit. Entitlement without meaningful choice is no entitlement at all, but that's the dilemma all curriculum design must tread. And I'm certainly not the kind of science teacher who'd ever argue that 'science is more valuable than the arts'.

Curriculum time

Triple science, done properly, *should* mean more time for students to explore ideas, carry out practical work and learn how science actually works. It should serve to deepen understanding and drive engagement.

If, however, schools end up squeezing triple science into roughly the same amount of curriculum time as combined science, the opposite will happen. Practical work will be reduced, lessons will become more rushed and students will spend less time planning investigations and making sense of results.

It's always struck me that under the current GCSE arrangements, students who don't study triple science are missing out on some of the best of what the subject has to offer. Without triple science, many may never learn about the origins of the universe, how elements are formed or how our solar system and planet came to be. They'll learn how to calculate and describe processes, but won't encounter some of the best scientific explanations for *existence itself*. Such knowledge is part of our shared scientific inheritance, with the potential to shape how young people understand the world, and even the wider universe, and their place within it. And yet, around three quarters of students will never have the opportunity to learn this amazing and fascinating GCSE content.

Qualifications or curriculum?

The counter-argument might be that what matters most is we retain a stimulating, coherent curriculum that enables progression. That 'space science' stuff could be brought into combined science – though then something else would have to make way for it.

I've previously taught many students who successfully moved into A Level physics from combined science. My school takes on many students who enter applied science routes from combined science (foundation and higher alike), as well as from triple science groups. The question then becomes whether students are getting enough time, depth and practical experience to genuinely prepare them for further study, or are instead following curriculums that have been prematurely narrowed in the name of 'efficiency'.

Triple science isn't the only route forward, but it's a powerful one, and should be available to all students who want it. This isn't about chasing grades, but about ensuring access. About satisfying students' curiosity. Above all, it's about making sure that students who want to do science aren't quietly told they 'don't belong'.

Triple science becoming a standard offer would have to amount to more than just a technical entitlement. It would entail committing to a rich, well-resourced science education for every student who wants it.

NEXT STEPS

What your science department can do ahead of the change

- Audit your schemes of work across biology, chemistry and physics, treating each subject with equal care.
- Identify where teaching materials are light on modelling, hooks and solid practice; identify any outdated or overly exam-driven resources.
- Review your practical equipment and expertise; what's well supported, and where will you struggle if numbers increase?
- Identify any staffing gaps and plan targeted CPD; make specialists out of your non-specialists – like me!
- Consider your succession plans and what will happen if a key specialist leaves.
- Review your technician time and lab capacity.
- Check your option pathways for any unintended barriers or opt-out loopholes.
- Revisit how triple science is presented to students and families; it should be an exciting option (and a potential pathway to lucrative future careers).
- Keep discussions with departments and management focused on entitlement; students wanting to study science should have genuine access, not just a theoretical offer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kit Betts-Masters is a lead practitioner for science and produces physics, education and technology videos for YouTube under the username @KitBetts-Masters; for more information, visit evaluateeverything.co.uk

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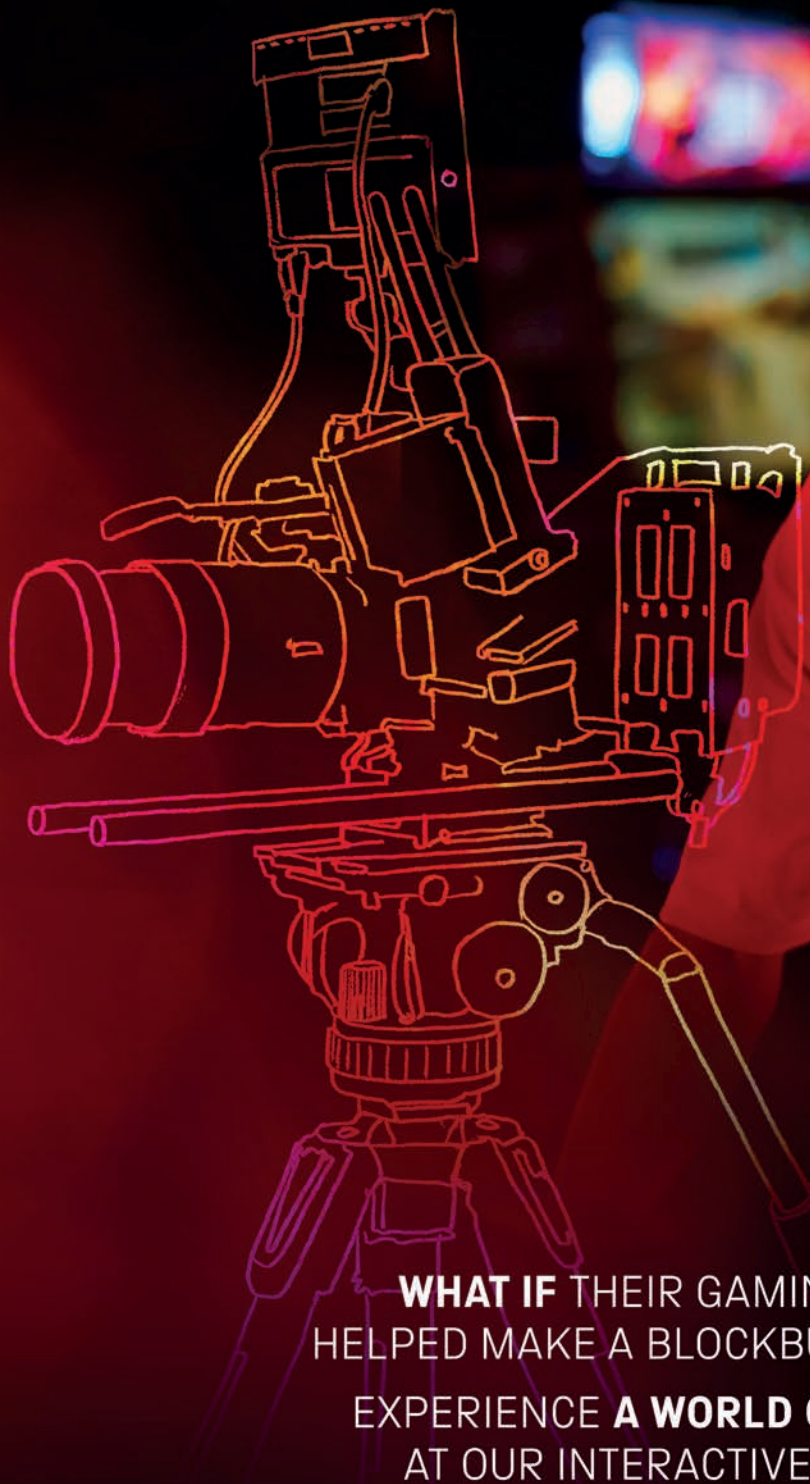

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From CAR to classroom

Shauna O'Brien considers the practical implications of curriculum and assessment review on science, and the actions department heads should be taking now...

Through our extensive work with science departments nationwide – including research with thousands of secondary science teachers and students – we know that the government's Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) is being viewed not as a minor adjustment, but a rare opportunity.

For science teachers, the question isn't simply whether GCSEs will change; it's whether those changes will meaningfully relieve the pressures currently being felt in classrooms – and if in so doing, they will create a stronger foundation for teaching and learning.

The CAR's final report was published in November 2025 (see tinyurl.com/ts148-NL2). Much of the discussion since then has been focused on its headline reforms, but in schools, attention is now being paid to what its conclusions might mean in practice. Three areas in particular could shape the next phase of science education – **accountability**, **curriculum content** and **practical work**.

Science and accountability

Accountability frameworks shape behaviour. They influence how curriculum time is allocated, how interventions are prioritised, and where leadership attention is directed.

The CAR's proposed Progress 8 reforms are therefore significant. If enacted, science would have two dedicated slots, placing it alongside English and maths, rather than within a broader grouping of subjects. These slots can be filled by a student's best science outcomes, including combined science, biology, chemistry, physics or computer science/computing.

For many, this is good news. Greater weighting could support increased curriculum time at KS4, renewed investment in KS3 foundations and more strategic interventions to secure strong science outcomes for all students, but as with any accountability shift, there may be some unintended consequences.

Schools will need to guard against a narrowing at KS3, and avoid curriculum 'gaming' through subject substitution. Leaders may wish to model different timetable scenarios reflecting the two science slots to better understand the implications for curriculum time and staffing, and protect their KS3 breadth and sequencing so that early specialisation or accountability pressures don't weaken students' foundational learning.

Tackling curriculum overload

If there's one issue that consistently emerges from our work with teachers, it's *content pressure*. In the 2025 Pearson School Report (see tinyurl.com/ts152-PSR2025), 81% of secondary science teachers told us the curriculum contains too much content. The CAR acknowledges this concern directly. The proposed approach involves refining and re-sequencing the curriculum from KS1 through to GCSE, removing unnecessary detail and outdated content while retaining a strong focus on core scientific concepts and understanding.

Done well, this would present a genuine opportunity – a curriculum prioritising depth over breadth, which supports long-term understanding and reduces the pace-driven pressure that many departments describe.

The critical factor will be to ensure reductions outweigh additions. The reforms will only ease workload and improve learning if difficult decisions over content removal are fully realised, but the Review signals a clear intent to address overload – something the profession has consistently called for.

Reinvigorating practical science

The CAR also recognises the central importance of practical work. Many departments report that hands-on practical experiences have declined since the pandemic, often replaced by demonstrations or video-based alternatives.

The Report emphasises that practical science should involve high-quality teacher demonstration and meaningful student participation, explicitly linking practical work to learning purpose within the Programme of Study.

While the CAR stops short of mandating more practical time, content refinement could create the space departments need to embed practical work more deliberately and effectively. A more focused curriculum may allow practical experiences to move from being squeezed in, to being integral to conceptual understanding. Practical science is often what sparks curiosity, builds confidence and connects theory to real-world application.

Looking ahead

Curriculum reform doesn't happen often. The CAR represents a significant response to the profession's concerns, and a chance to strengthen science's place within the system.

As ever, though, the real impact will hinge on the implementation – how the CAR's recommendations translate into specifications, assessments and classroom practice. But there remains a real opportunity here to reduce overload, reinforce science's status and create a more coherent experience for both teachers and students. For a subject that sits at the heart of innovation, health, sustainability and the future workforce, this matters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Shauna O'Brien is head of science at Pearson; for further news and support to help you prepare for science reform, visit tinyurl.com/ts152-SP1

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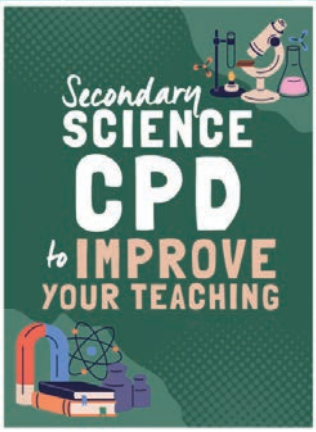

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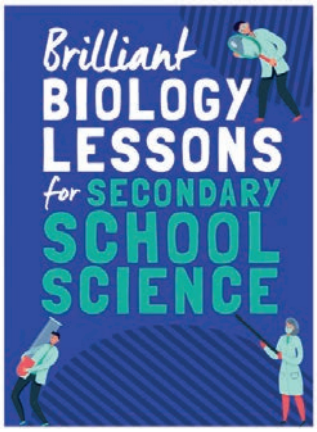

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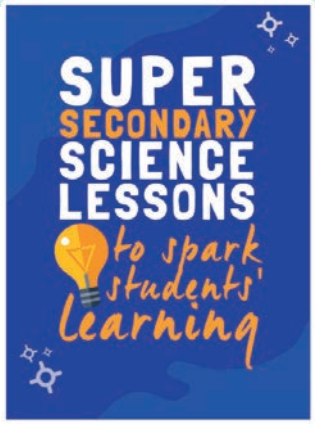

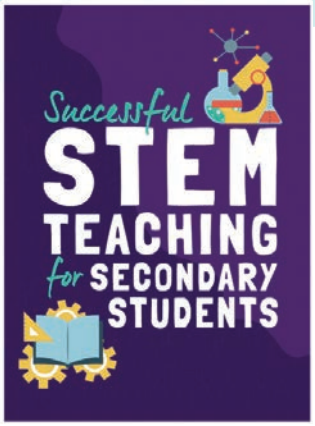

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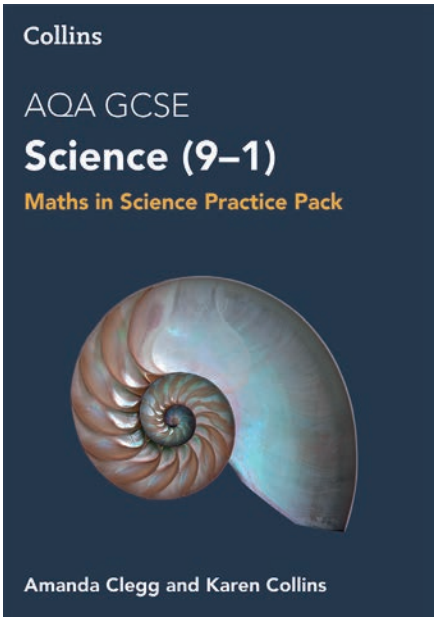
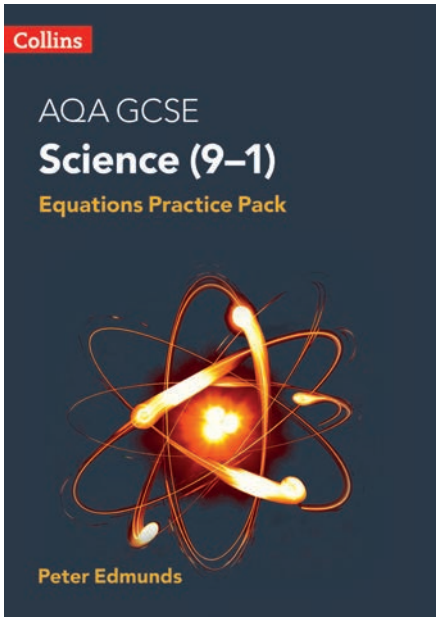


Equations practice



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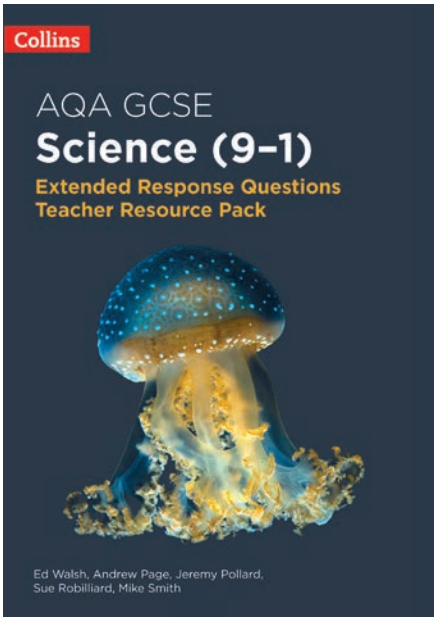

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Losing count

How can you ensure that the maths in your science lessons is clear and accessible for your students? **Amanda Clegg** and **Karen Collins** share their thoughts...

We've all been there. Imagine marking a set of mock examinations and seeing that once again, students have struggled with the graph question. Lines of best fit are straight when the data suggests a curve. The points they've plotted bear no resemblance to the table of data.

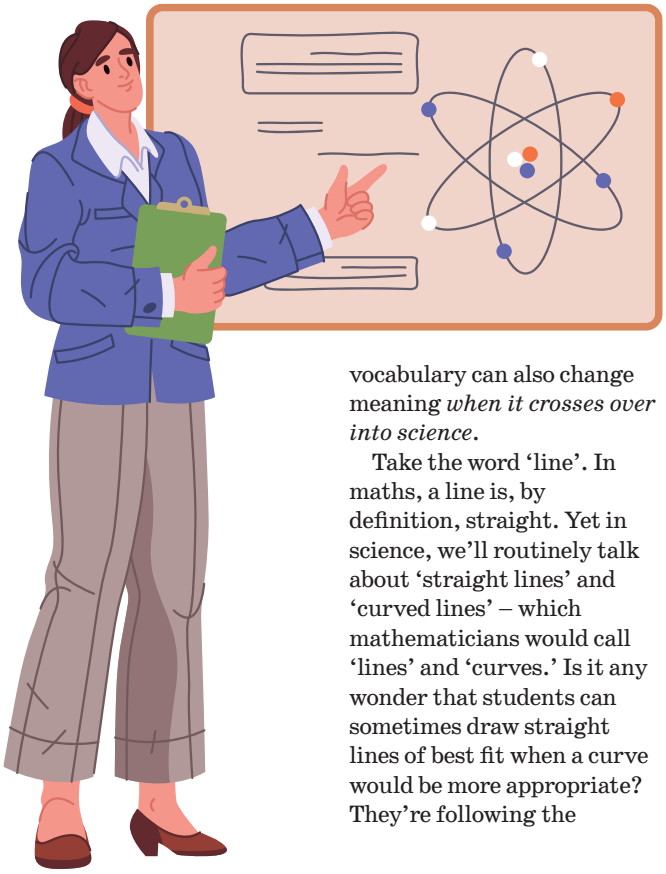
It's natural for science teachers to assume that once students have been taught this knowledge in maths, they should be able to transfer it to science; that having received what Jonathan Osborne coined as their 'mathematics vaccination' (see tinyurl.com/ts152-SM1), they *should* be immune to such mistakes, and be able to transfer the relevant knowledge to other curriculum areas.

As leaders, we tend to assume that science teachers are confident in teaching the maths skills required by their subject, while also being aware of what students are learning in their maths lessons. Often, however, neither is quite true. Even if you're personally comfortable with the maths content of science, you're likely unaware of the strategies your maths colleagues are using.

Science teachers can lack what Lee S. Schulman once described as the 'pedagogical content knowledge' needed to teach maths effectively (see tinyurl.com/ts152-SM2), which is a recipe for student confusion.

Lost in translation

We all know how vocabulary can shift meaning between subjects, but far fewer appreciate how mathematical vocabulary can also change meaning *when it crosses over into science*.



Take the word 'line'. In maths, a line is, by definition, straight. Yet in science, we'll routinely talk about 'straight lines' and 'curved lines' – which mathematicians would call 'lines' and 'curves.' Is it any wonder that students can sometimes draw straight lines of best fit when a curve would be more appropriate? They're following the language we've used – just not quite in the way we intended.

Nor is it just vocabulary where things get muddled. This year's exam reports for maths showed that many students lost marks for not showing their working, but how often do we require students to show their working in science? Could we perhaps design a common format for laying out calculations across both subjects?

The curriculum collision

Things can get even more awkward when curriculum timings don't align. Let's say the maths department won't cover graphical representation until Y8, and that when they do, they'll only tackle linear relationships. In science, meanwhile, you're asking Y7s to plot graphs from experiments in their first term. Science ends up teaching line graphs before maths does.

This isn't anyone's fault; it's just the reality of two busy departments working in isolation, but it puts science teachers in an impossible position. Do we avoid graphs until maths has 'done' them? Or do we teach the skill ourselves, and risk contradicting approaches students will learn later?

The Curriculum and Assessment Review's recently published final report suggests that this is a recognised issue, for which a resolution is being sought – but that doesn't help those students who are currently working their way through.

Three steps worth taking

A more productive approach would be to take an honest look at your department and audit everyone's confidence in teaching the mathematical requirements of 11-16 science. Can your team identify where they have explicitly taught these skills? You might discover some interesting gaps.

Having identified those gaps, you'll need a plan for sustained development and support, and to determine what CPD may be needed. Consider holding strategic planning meetings where you can discuss specific elements of maths in science and how to teach them effectively. What adjustments could different departments make to ensure smooth transfers of knowledge? Maybe you can agree on use of consistent terminology, and when certain skills should be introduced and reinforced?

What's key is that any conversations with maths colleagues lead to tangible improvements. This might entail joint planning sessions, observing each other's lessons, developing a shared glossary or creating materials that bridge the gap between maths lessons and science applications.

Yes, this will take time and require co-ordinating between busy schedules, but the payoff is significant – students who can actually use and apply their mathematical knowledge confidently within the context of science lessons.

Amanda Clegg and Karen Collins are co-authors of the AQA GCSE Science (9-1) Maths in Science Practice Pack published by Collins

FOUR LEGS GOOD

Karen Hart outlines some strategies for engaging students with the themes and observations of George Orwell's evergreen totalitarian satire...

"*All Animals are equal. But some animals are more equal than others.*"

I first read *Animal Farm* in Y7, when our English teacher set us a reading assignment for the half term holiday. I chose the book as I thought it would impress her – which I think it did, a bit – but more importantly, I *loved* it, and was amazed that a book written in such a simple way could deliver such a powerful punch.

Having recently re-read it, my feelings haven't changed. *Animal Farm* remains a great book to use for literacy study with Y7 and Y8, as it provides a wide range of themes for inspiring both class discussions and written work.

Getting started

I've found that exploring some background on Orwell's life and ideology with students is a good idea before starting the book, then proceeding to read a chapter or two at a time, working on separate themes as they present themselves.

The book begins by introducing us to the story's main characters, so talk about these. Can students predict any possible conflicts between Old Major's plan for a life free of human tyranny and what we're told of the other characters we meet? How would Molly, for example, with her fancy ribbons and portrayal as a dainty, pretty creature, find this new way of life? Perhaps her life will be more difficult going forward, since her present role of pulling the farmer's trap doesn't seem too demanding?

Discuss the meaning and implications of the slogan '*Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.*'

Can the pupils see how Orwell's personal beliefs are already evident here, especially when Old Major talks about the way animals blindly do as they're told, when in reality they could run the whole farm? That it's humans who need animals, rather than the other way round? Do pupils see how Orwell is really talking here about how the rich use the poor in the same way?

"Squealer uses clever tactics, such as fear, lies and what we would now term as gaslighting, to manipulate and motivate"

Writing activity – Creating characters

Ask students to re-write the first chapter of *Animal Farm* using their own cast of animals. Instruct them to start from, "*Before long the other animals began to arrive and make themselves comfortable after their different fashions,*" before going on to describe a group of farmyard animals arriving and making themselves comfy while they wait for Old Major. The chapter can end with all the animals assembled in the barn waiting for the speech to begin.

A rules-based order

With the animals' commandments written on the board, ask the pupils if they think these represent a good choice of rules. Can pupils think of any changes, or additional commandments that could benefit the animals within this new way of living? While the last commandment states that '*All animals are equal*', maybe there should be an additional commandment such as – '*All animals have equal say on the running of the farm*'. What do the students think?

Writing activity – Changing the commandments

Have the students copy the seven commandments into their workbooks, and underneath each, write at least two carefully thought-out additions or changes they would make to benefit the farm animals as a whole. Tell the students to think how food will be distributed, the way work will be designated, the chain of command and so on. Ask volunteers to read their amendments to the class.

Discussion activity – Thinking about manipulation

Re-read the ending of Chapter 3 – from '*The mystery of where the milk went to was soon cleared up...*' to the chapter's end. Explain how, from this point on, we start to gain a clear perspective on the way things are progressing within the hierarchy of the farm.

When Squealer gave the other animals his explanation for why the milk and apples were given to the pigs, he said it was required to keep the pigs healthy, because they contained certain substances necessary for the pigs' wellbeing, as proven by science. Do students think this is true? Why would he say this? What does this show us about the way the pigs think about themselves, compared to the rest of the animals?

Writing activity – 'The Idea Thief'

In Chapter 5, we see the disagreements between Snowball and Napoleon come to a head, resulting in Snowball being forced out of the farm. Thinking about the way Napoleon goes on to take credit for Snowball's clever plans for the windmill, ask the students to write a short story on the same theme, titled 'The Idea Thief'. Begin by discussing some story ideas as a class, with pupils sharing their ideas for potential scenarios – such as, for example, a cook who invents a recipe for delicious donuts, only to have the recipe stolen by a rival who then passes the recipe off as their own. Ask volunteers to read their stories to the class.

Dramatising deceit

The character of Squealer is interesting to examine in more detail, as he uses clever tactics such as fear, lies and what we would now term as gaslighting to manipulate and motivate the rest of the animals.

Students might like to try acting out a scene from the book that shows Squealer's use of propaganda techniques on the other animals. We could, for instance, look to the scene when the animals discover that the pigs are sleeping in human beds. Working in groups of four, students can play the parts of Boxer (misguided but loyal), Muriel the goat (one of the oldest, wisest animals on the farm), Clover (a kind and motherly figure who questions the pigs' rules) and Squealer.

Creative task – Create a propaganda poster

Extend the students' study of the book into their art activities by tasking them with designing their own A3 propaganda poster, in the style of those produced circa WWII. There are some great examples to be found online that you could use for inspiration.

Students can choose any of the slogans from the book – for example, the classic 'Four legs good, two legs bad' – though remind them that it's often the simplest designs that are the most powerful, and that they should aim to convey the book's overall tone and message in their work.

Discussion activity – Equality and exploitation

As the book's narrative unfolds, we see how the animals' original seven commandments are constantly re-written until they're eventually replaced altogether by one simple maxim: '*All Animals Are Equal, But Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others*'. This ironic phrase exposes how the pigs have manipulated language to justify inequality and oppression. Squealer is shown as being particularly adept at using language to manipulate the other animals; can the students think of any specific examples where Squealer is shown as being manipulative in what he says or does?

TAKE IT FURTHER

- George Orwell gave *Animal Farm* the subheading '*A Fairy Story*'. Talk about how this is a clever use of irony.
- Discuss the vocabulary associated with the book – e.g. 'hierarchy', 'manipulation', 'satire', 'comrade', 'propaganda', 'allegory' and 'corruption'. Ask pupils to research and write a definition for each word.
- Talk about how Moses the raven tells the animals about Sugarcandy Mountain. What do the students feel this represents? And why does Napoleon allow Moses to stay on the farm?
- As life on the farm becomes more difficult, Napoleon organises 'Spontaneous demonstrations'. Ask students why they believe these were introduced.
- Talk about how the animals in the book could be turned into human characters. These could include having Squealer be a politician, seeing Boxer as a poor, exploited worker barely making ends meet, or portraying Mollie as a modern-day influencer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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MARK SMARTER

Aaron Swan shows how, with the applications already on your school-issued devices, and a little ingenuity, the task of giving students feedback can become considerably less onerous...

One of the most arduous tasks of any essay-based subject is that of marking. Deep marking, mandatory formal assessments, individualised feedback and student responses combine to create a workload that requires a significant time investment from teachers in order to connect with the students' thought process.

Here, I want to explore how marking and feedback can be structured differently, so as to make the best use of the technology and software now available to us, without resorting to paid third-party products.

Time and space constraints

Like most teachers I know, I find marking and writing feedback to be an arduous task that can pile up quickly and give rise to numerous problems. The limited space available on pages and in margins for comments is an issue. The student's cognition needs feedback, of course – but so does the quality of their expression, which is a separate developmental objective.

Cultural and humanities subjects regularly task students with writing essays that balance subjective and personal responses with objective and distanced ones, meaning that our feedback must be sensitive and sympathetic to both. A student's spelling, punctuation, grammar and handwriting still warrants commentary – and then there's the level of literacy preceding their response.

I've used digital markbooks for decades, but the final piece of the puzzle has been to engage a speech-to-text function that records my feedback alongside their grades. In so doing, issues of time and space constraints have changed in my favour. My transcribed dialogue lets me talk students through their work in detail, whilst lending much more depth to my praise and commentary on their successes and demonstrations of metalearning (such as their planning, engagement and focus). My feedback to each student is starting to resemble a letter that guides them through my experience of their work, thus making it more personal and relatable.

> *"My transcribed dialogue lets me talk students through their work in detail"*

A nurture excercise

Striking the right tone has taken some time, of course, but the process now feels much more like a nurture exercise, and less like 'feature spotting' for the success criteria. I'm frequently using students' names, dropping in lots of positive remarks and stating what I'm enjoying. My marking is now more enthusiastic than ever, which is what I think makes it meaningful. Here's how to try something similar for yourself.

Move from paper to digital

Storing raw marks in a digital database is commonplace, but keeping said database in a cloud storage location (such as a OneDrive folder) is less so. By doing so, you can benefit from a few useful features – particularly the way in which an online location will make your data easily accessible to mobiles and tablets.

Remember that workbooks contain sheets

Spreadsheet applications, such as Excel, typically present users with a workbook that can contain numerous different sheets, selectable via tabs at the bottom of the screen. When setting up their workbooks, teachers will often dedicate different sheets to different teaching groups, but an alternative – a potentially better – approach could be assign different sheets to different *data classes*.

For example, 'Sheet 1' could be used to enter the raw marks for each assessment. 'Sheet 2' could then 'reference' the raw marks and convert these to a percentage. 'Sheet 3' can then reference the percentage and convert this to a grade.

This quantitative data tends to be all that's required by the school, but we could

also create a 'Sheet 4' for recording qualitative data.

Less 'feedback', more 'dialogue'

With your database stored in the cloud and set up with sheets for quantitative and qualitative data, we can increase our marking efficiency yet further. Grab your stack of assessments and your phone, call up the database and open your qualitative feedback sheet. The intersection of your 'Student' rows and 'Assessment' column is where you can insert written feedback on students' essays – but instead of typing it out, tap the microphone icon on your mobile's on-screen keyboard and *dictate your comments*.

This can speed up the process considerably, though it will entail getting used to the idiosyncrasies of the speech-to-text facility you're using (and potentially having to state when you want a full stop or comma to be inserted).

Batch print your feedback

The simplest way of distributing your feedback to students would be to just simply copy and paste the contents of your 'qualitative feedback' column into a series of separate Word documents – but that's not the fastest method. Through the use of Word's 'mail merge' function, you can instead turn a single template into a series of different feedback sheets that are unique to each student and send the full batch out with a single click.

Mail merge operations can also reference the qualitative data for each individual; their raw marks and grades, as well as whole class results, such as averages or rankings – information the teacher simply can't know when marking work by hand. Making a template effectively means 'writing once', before printing for all.

Further advantages using AI

Now that your feedback is entirely digital, you can copy and paste the relevant column of comments into an AI service and instantly generate a whole-class summary that focuses on the successes made by 'all students', 'most students' and 'some students'.

Better yet, send the row of qualitative data pertaining to one student through AI to help generate a cumulative report on his or her progress, commenting on any recurrent successes or shortcomings.

This type of summary can be useful for parents, student reviews or SEN requests.

Digital records can also be advantageous when planning lessons prior to assessing. Send the qualitative feedback through AI, providing the direction to rephrase it as 'step-by-step instructional guidance'.

If you then mail merge this foregrounding and print it off, you now have a set of custom guidance notes for every student to read before undertaking an activity that will show them how to avoid repeating prior errors.

What we want to achieve here is a move away from comments such as '*You need to read for meaning sufficiently to ensure full understanding*' and towards clearer instruction, such as '*Read two or three times using skimming, scanning and full reading before you start your response*'.

Pulling everything together

The use of existing everyday technologies – primarily mobile devices – to assist in feedback can be a true game changer when it comes to productivity.

A number of third-party apps have already stepped in to provide such gains (albeit for a fee), but it's worth bearing in mind that you already have the tools needed to achieve similar results, which will at the same time let you retain more control over the variables involved.

We just need to keep sharing how best to implement the many features of existing assets, like the productivity software and learning platforms already commonplace in schools.

The complexities involved in changing workflows, devising templates and setting up spreadsheets may well call for some form of ICT-related teacher CPD. But this would be training that ultimately helps you and your colleagues make better use of assets and facilities you're already paying for – in the service of improved productivity and less workload.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Aaron Swan is an English teacher, Language For Learning lead, and has been a head of department

HOW TO CREATE AN ASSESSMENT TEMPLATE

1. Set up an Excel workbook with columns for 'student names', 'class group' and 'assessment title'.
2. Once you've added your feedback, save the workbook as a .csv file and exit Excel.
3. In Word, open the 'Mailings' tab, click on the 'Select Recipients' button and then select the 'Use an Existing List' option. Select the workbook you created earlier (and the qualitative data sheet if prompted). Word is now connected to your workbook.
4. To build your template, click the 'Insert Merge Field' button. We want to include at least the student names and the qualitative feedback as fields here, and create our feedback sheet around these fields.
5. Refine which students you want to populate the fields by clicking on the 'Edit Recipient List' button, and using the blue text options shown under 'Refine Recipient List' to sort and filter by class or year group. Only those students with ticks shown beside their names will be included in mail merge output.
6. When you're ready, click the 'Finish and Merge' button and select 'Print Documents'. Print or preview your sheets from the Mailings tab using 'Finish and Merge'. The printer dialogue box will give you the option to print the output to a PDF file should you wish.

[MATHS PROBLEM]

RANDOM-WALK PLOTS

Understanding patterns within randomness can be challenging, says **Colin Foster**

In this lesson, students make a random-walk plot to make sense of the outcomes from flipping a coin

THE DIFFICULTY

If you throw an ordinary coin, can you predict whether it will come up heads or tails?

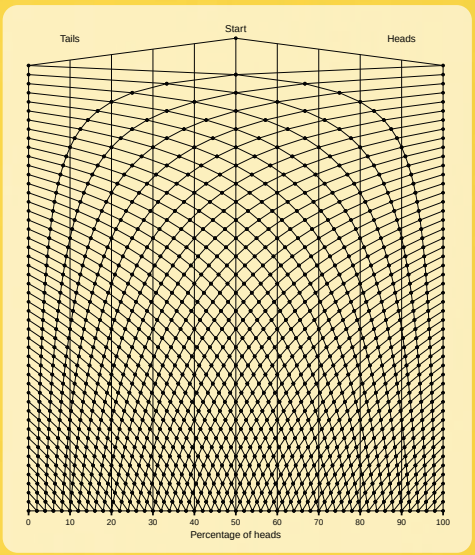
Students will probably say no, because the coin could show either heads or tails, and if it's a fair coin, we can't know in advance which. The outcome is random, depending on chance, meaning we can't predict which side it will be.

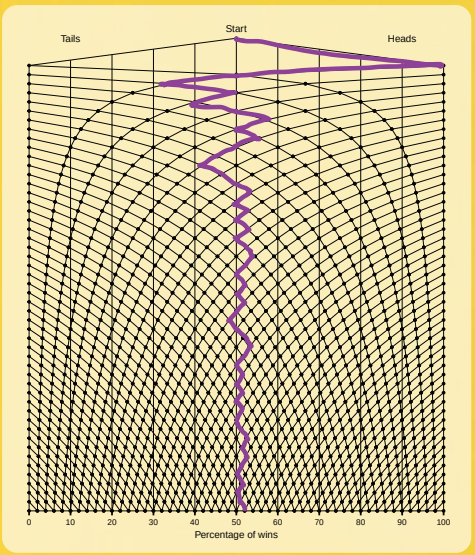
*If you throw **a hundred** ordinary coins, can you predict what will happen?*

This time, we can predict that there should be about 50 heads and 50 tails. It's quite mysterious that we ***can't*** predict the outcome of ***any one*** of the 100 coins. But we can predict the outcome of the entire group! Students often find this aspect of randomness puzzling.

THE SOLUTION

*Instead of throwing 100 coins, we're going to throw **one coin 100 times**, so we can see the pattern developing gradually. Each time we throw the coin, we won't know if it will come up heads or tails – we'll assume they're equally likely outcomes. But nevertheless, we'll see a pattern develop.*





Give students a copy of a blank ***random-walk plot***, pictured above left (available from tinyurl.com/ts152-MP1). Beginning at the top ('Start'), they proceed to throw a coin 50 times, drawing one step right or one step left with each throw, depending on whether the coin comes up heads or tails. The sequence 'HTTHT HHTHT TTHHH THTHT HHTTH THTTH HHTTH THTHT HHTHT THTHH' is shown in the completed example on the right.

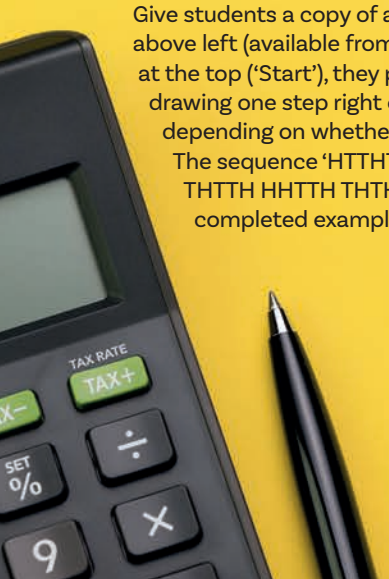
The plot is designed so that at every stage, the position you've reached along the scale at the bottom tells you the percentage of heads obtained up to that point. (The design is like a fraction wall.)

When they have finished, students can do a 'gallery walk' to see everyone else's plots. Even though they may look quite different at the top, they should all be quite similar nearer the bottom.

Checking for understanding

What do you see? What does it mean?

Students will realise that although they can't predict the outcome on any one throw, the ***percentage*** of heads gets very close to 50% after a large number of throws. This is known as the ***law of large numbers***. Indeed, it's ***because*** the outcome of an individual throw is completely unpredictable that we get the predictable result with large numbers of throws!



Colin Foster (**@colinfoster77**) is a Professor of Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University. He has written many books and articles for mathematics teachers. **foster77.co.uk**, **blog.foster77.co.uk**

LEARNING LAB

IN THIS ISSUE

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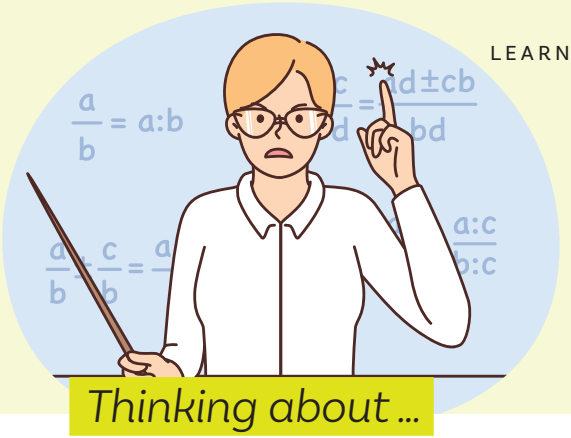


Thinking about ...

YOUR 'TEACHER VOICE'

There are few things more beautiful than a teacher with a well-modulated voice delivering a lesson in a calm yet inspiring manner. If that's you, then turn the page – you don't need me... or do you?

One in five teachers take time off due to voice-related problems – partly due, I believe, to very few of them receiving any kind of voice coaching during their training or subsequent CPD. Voice coaching can, and should be right at the forefront of how we deliver lessons, as how we talk to a class has huge ramifications both for the learning environment and staff wellbeing.

In 2007, I set up Talking Voice to guide teachers on their voice and classroom presence. As a former teacher turned opera singer I have a wealth of lived experience and knowledge around voice and performance, which I love sharing to empower teachers, from trainees to retirees.

The 'Drink more water and stand upright' approach is a minimal nod to what can be offered. Hydration certainly matters, but genuine training should be more about equipping teachers with practical tools that make a tangible difference.

Whatever your subject, you can improve on how you deliver it. A science teacher applying energy and clarity to their delivery, or a computing teacher using storytelling to spark curiosity, can transform students' connection with their respective subjects for the better. I've witnessed lessons come alive after teachers have recognised that their delivery has dipped and have shifted their tone or approach accordingly to re-engage their students.

Voice coaching isn't about coming up with two or three preset tones and simply cycling through them; it's about reflective practice, and developing the adaptability needed to keep lessons on track. Learning about your own voice can be genuinely enjoyable. When were you last allowed to make all kinds of vocal noises and be absurdly expressive as part of your CPD?

An athlete wouldn't dream of running round a full-size track without first warming up their muscles, and yet teachers will regularly perform near Olympian-level talking tasks each day in extremely challenging circumstances, without so much as a warm-up. This is why I'll always run through a few warm-up activities that anybody can complete in a few minutes – with no singing required.

We're all creatures of habit, and this extends to our vocal signatures. The good news, however, is that you can alter your voice at will and learn how to feel comfortable with your adult speaking voice.

I love what I do, and always try to ensure that those I'm coaching have fun while learning, while at the same time asking that they take away two or three pointers and start using them at once.

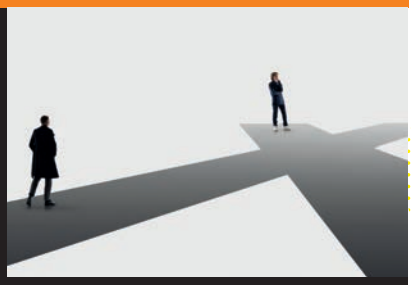
In that spirit, allow me to share the following five tips that will make a rapid difference to your vocal delivery:

1. Notice your chin position – lifting it strains your vocal mechanism and thins your tone
2. Record yourself issuing everyday instructions; listen out for your expression, emphasis and pitch variation
3. Check your pacing – do you speak in one continuous stream, or pause and speak in meaningful 'chunks'?
4. Watch your facial expression – if you look bored, students will feel bored too
5. Build vocal warm-ups into your day.

Try following these for a week and see what difference they make. Good luck!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Janet Shell B.Ed; AGSM is founder of Talking Voice (talkingvoice.net), working alongside teacher training providers to enhance teachers' classroom performance while delivering training on vocal health and safety. Her book *Talking Teachers* is available now (£8.99, lulu.com)

FOCUS ON...
CAREER CHANGERS



People who enter teaching after building careers elsewhere are becoming a significant part of the profession's future, prompting schools to think carefully about how best to support them.

Recruitment pressures account for part of this shift, yet many career changers bring with them qualities that are well-suited to the classroom – particularly strong interpersonal skills, and the maturity that comes from having gained experience in other sectors.

WHAT CAREER CHANGERS BRING

Many career changers will be comfortable in professional environments, having already spent years managing responsibility, solving problems and working with different groups of people. This confidence can help them settle quickly into staff teams – but also conceal the reality that starting again in a new profession is demanding, and often disorientating.

Some trainees will arrive with experience that translates directly into subject teaching. Hemal Trivedy, who trained at Middlesex Learning Trust's SCITT and is now a maths teacher at The Compton School, entered the profession after many years in finance and digital banking. He brought strong subject knowledge and well-developed organisational skills. Even so, he still needed time to adapt to the uninterrupted pace of school days, and the constant decision-making teachers have to contend with.

Others bring with them specialist knowledge that can enrich curriculum content. Craig Rydqvist, who trained with the Trust's SCITT before becoming Head of Business and Economics at Wren Finchley, can draw on 25 years' experience in international finance to give students an authentic sense of how economic ideas operate beyond the textbook, while also using his background to support colleagues.

DIFFERING NEEDS

Career changers can also face challenges that differ from those confronting younger trainees. Many will have spent years established in specific roles, with the result that stepping into a profession where everything feels unfamiliar can seem unsettling. They'll often compare themselves to colleagues who seem more at ease in school settings, thus leading to uncertainty during early training.

They may also need greater clarity regarding the specific culture of schools. Teaching demands sustained focus, emotional energy and the ability to move quickly between tasks. Even those used to more demanding roles are often surprised by the sheer intensity of working with pupils throughout the day. Those unwritten expectations of school life – how assessment fits into the wider curriculum, how pastoral responsibilities shape the week, how teachers should deploy authority over pupils who test boundaries – all take time to learn.

Behaviour management is one area where career changers will frequently need focused support. Approaches that work well with adults, such as detailed explanations and negotiation, don't always translate easily to classes of teenagers. Without clear modelling and opportunities to practise strategies, this gap can quickly become overwhelming. Consistency, observation and feedback focused on small, achievable adjustments will usually prove to be the most effective forms of support.

THE SUPPORT CAREER CHANGERS NEED

Ensure that inductions help them understand the structure of school life before they take on heavier teaching loads, and provide them with early opportunities to observe more senior colleagues. In this way they can get a sense of the many ways in which teachers establish their presence and build relationships.

Career changers tend to appreciate feedback that's both practical and direct, with clear links to what they can try next in the classroom. Small organisational decisions – such as ensuring a balanced timetable, providing accessible curriculum materials and protecting time for planning – will make a significant difference during those early months.

Schools also support career changers well when trainees are encouraged to draw on skills developed during their previous careers. When, say, a former heritage professional draws on communication techniques they developed in museums, students will benefit, while the trainee grow in confidence. This sense of continuity can help them establish a teaching identity that feels authentic, rather than separate from their prior working lives.

EMMA HAZLEGREAVES IS ASSOCIATE HEADTEACHER AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR STANDARDS AT MIDDLESEX LEARNING TRUST – FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT MIDDLESEXLEARNINGTRUST.ORG.UK

DO THIS

FOLLOW THE POLICY

ROBIN LAUNDER PRESENTS HIS TIPS FOR OVERSEEING BRILLIANT BEHAVIOUR...

Every school has a behaviour policy (it's a legal requirement) and you must know yours in detail. It will specify the school rules, detail the use of warnings and sanctions and (probably) describe the responsibilities of designated staff, such as those on call. It may also contain behaviour management advice.

When you know the policy in detail, you'll be able to use it with confidence. But if you're shaky about its content, or unsure as to its processes and procedures, you'll begin to doubt yourself. You might start thinking, "*Well, maybe the student's right – maybe it's not a C3, maybe it is a C2...*" That lack of certainty will lead to a lack of both confidence and effectiveness.

Behaviour management is a team sport. Every teacher needs to be pulling in the same direction and doing things in the same way. The behaviour policy is the school's way of achieving that end. If you follow it, everyone wins – you, your colleagues, the students. But if you pick and choose the bits you want, and discount those you don't, you'll weaken the document, undermine your colleagues and make the process of teaching and learning that much harder.

Reading your school's policy will always be time well spent. So read it, learn it and follow it.

Robin Launder is a behaviour management consultant and speaker; this column is adapted from his book, *Brilliant Behaviour in 60 Seconds or Less* (Routledge, £18.99)

37%

of multi-academy trusts reported having in-year financial deficits in 2024/25 – down from 60% in 2023/24

Source: Kreston UK Academies Benchmark Report 2026

York St John University recently played host to a gathering of education leaders, teachers and researchers, there to mark the launch of the Institute of AI Education – a new initiative aimed at helping schools navigate the latest developments in AI.

The Institute of AI Education's co-founders, Narinder Gill and Dr Beth Lane, envisage it as a collaborative hub that will work with schools, universities and other organisations in the sector to produce research-informed guidance, and develop professional development and support for educators. The Institute's activities will be underpinned by a belief that any use of AI within education should be human-centred, and always serve to support teachers, rather than replace them.

Gill and Dr Lane co-presented a session during the event titled 'Settling the Vision', in which they elaborated on their journey towards establishing the Institute, and how they hoped to see sector-wide research and collaboration produce a clear sense of purpose and strong ethical foundations with respect to AI's place within learning.

The rest of the day saw a series of discussions and presentations themed around some of the most pressing AI-related education issues that educators are currently grappling with, such as the need to build AI literacy; how to ensure that the technology is both equitable and inclusive, and the requirement for students and teachers to retain agency in how AI solutions are used.

Further Institute of AI events and partnerships are currently in the planning stages. Those interested in keeping up with its ongoing work and upcoming activities should visit **linkedin.com/company/institute-of-ai-education**

CLOSE UP ON...

INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

Intergenerational practice is often associated with early years settings or care homes, yet secondary schools are uniquely positioned to harness its potential.

At its heart, intergenerational practice isn't about charity or nostalgia – it's about creating purposeful, reciprocal relationships between generations that benefit everyone involved. When done well, it can support empathy, communication skills, critical thinking and social responsibility – all core outcomes for secondary education.

For three years, we at AHN Education & Training have been training practitioners based at education, healthcare and community settings in how to plan, facilitate and evaluate intergenerational experiences ethically and effectively. We've consistently seen how intergenerational work flourishes when educators understand how relationships develop, when to intervene, and when to step back.

Secondary students can bring particular strengths to intergenerational settings. Adolescents are capable of reflection, questioning and meaningful dialogue; when given structured opportunities to engage with older adults, they develop confidence and patience, and gain a deeper understanding of ageing, health and social change. These encounters can challenge stereotypes on both sides.

Intergenerational practice in secondary schools can't, however, be 'bolted on' as a one-off project or enrichment day. Without careful design, clear safeguarding frameworks and thoughtful facilitation, the interactions risk becoming superficial or tokenistic. Teachers may feel uncertain regarding boundaries, the need for curriculum alignment or how to manage the complex emotional moments that

can arise when students engage with older adults.

Intergenerational practitioners require what we term as 'intergenerational literacy' – the ability to read social and emotional cues across age groups, balance autonomy with protection and support authentic connection without over-directing it. Such skills are learned over time, grounded in theory and strengthened through ongoing reflective practice.

In secondary schools, intergenerational learning can connect meaningfully to PSHE, citizenship, English, history and even STEM subjects through shared problem-solving and lived experience. We're increasingly seeing 'hard to reach' secondary students participating in intergenerational projects, including those who struggle with attendance.

These kinds of projects will also be closely aligned with schools' wider responsibilities around community engagement and inclusion, and how they prepare young people for life beyond the classroom.

As interest in intergenerational approaches continues to grow, we would encourage secondary educators to view this work as a valuable pedagogical opportunity. When supported by high quality training, the practice can enrich learning, strengthen communities and help young people develop relational skills that they'll carry into adulthood. If we want intergenerational practice to have a lasting impact in secondary education, we must invest not just in programmes, but in the people who facilitate them.

DI NEWTON IS A FORMER SECONDARY TEACHER AND PASTORAL MIDDLE LEADER, AND CO-FOUNDER OF AHN EDUCATION AND TRAINING – A UK-BASED PROVIDER OF ACCREDITED INTERGENERATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND CPD; FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT AHNINTERGENERATIONALTRAINING.CO.UK

£23 million

Level of government investment in a four-year pilot trialling the use of AI and edtech tools in schools, due to commence in September 2026

Source: DfE

Need to know

A new study produced by the University of Birmingham has found that the average school is spending more than 100 hours a week on policing students' use of smartphones.

Researchers reached that figure by analysing data collected from 815 students and staff across 20 UK schools – of which 13 set more 'restrictive' smartphone policies, and seven more 'permissive' policies.

The schools with more restrictive policies spent, on average, 102 hours per week on implementing said policies; for those with more permissive policies, the figure was 108 hours per week.

A senior author of the study, Professor Hareth Al-Janabi, remarked: "*The findings are that schools are spending a significant amount of time policing smartphone use in both types of policy. While there is a small difference in the resources needed to implement a restrictive policy, we are under no illusion that policing phone use is a big strain for schools, and that a stricter policy is no silver bullet.*"

For more information on the University of Birmingham's ongoing research into secondary schools' implementation of smartphone policies, visit tinyurl.com/ts152-LL1

IDEAS FOR TEACHING...
FACT-CHECKING

The BBC Verify team has attracted much praise in recent years for its work in fact-checking the claims made by participants featured in the BBC's current affairs coverage. Could young people be encouraged to adopt similar practices when evaluating information they've encountered online?

The conclusions students reach as to a source's veracity are certainly significant, since the outcomes of their deliberations – and hence the extent to which they trust said information – will ultimately influence the quality of their learning.

One approach to doing this could be to examine the BBC Verify team's regular bulletins on the BBC News Channel and online reports (see bbc.co.uk/news/bbcverify), identify the kinds of questions they ask of the material they check, and explore how they arrive at their answers. We can then invite young people to adopt those underlying principles and apply them in similar ways when scrutinising information themselves.

After closely examining a number of BBC Verify reports, I've come to see that the following queries will often form part of their fact-checking process:

- Are the specific claims in question still accurate when compared with other credible sources of information?
- Is the general picture presented by the source borne out by verifiable facts available elsewhere?
- How strong is the evidence used to support the claims made by the source?
- Is there any evidence that isn't acknowledged by the source, but which has to be considered in order to build an accurate picture of the situation?
- Are there any other alternative explanations or perspectives beyond those presented by the source?

This is by no means a comprehensive list, of course. The questions we pose will naturally depend on the nature of the material under review, but at the heart of much of BBC Verify's work is the pursuit of independent corroboration – a well-established strategy for testing information.

For decades, long before the internet as we know it today, media outlets would routinely compare claims and material issued by different – sometimes competing – sources. Much may have changed in our modern media landscape since then, but the fundamentals of that process remain as valuable as ever – perhaps even more so, given the growing need to check dubious statements and assertions expressed by AI models.

Some caveats should be noted, however. Obviously, there are significant differences between the high-stakes journalism with which the BBC Verify team concerns itself and the 'Find out about...' tasks you set your students. We should be further mindful that a process of verification applicable to one particular scenario may be less helpful in another.

When establishing the value of information we're thinking about using, there's also much more involved than simply seeking corroboration from elsewhere. Moreover, if we present students with a checklist citing 'key factors' as evaluative fact-checking criteria, for example, they may well respond to those prompts somewhat mechanically, dealing with each in turn rather than making a holistic and thoughtful assessment of the whole.

The fact remains, however, that teachers should want their students to try and look beyond the information presented before them, and reach their own conclusions based on the wider context and media environment that information sits within. And in this, at least, the principles underpinning the work of the BBC Verify Team provide a good starting point.

DR. ANDREW K. SHENTON WORKED FOR MANY YEARS AS AN EXTENDED PROJECT QUALIFICATION TEACHER AT MONKSEATON HIGH SCHOOL, AND THEN IN THE SAME CAPACITY AT WHITLEY BAY HIGH; HE IS NOW RETIRED

Time-saving tips for... *MFL Teachers*

1. USE AI TO CREATE YOUR RESOURCES

AI tools can help you instantly create a range of learning resources – customised bingo cards, levelled reading texts, grammar quizzes, flash cards, and tongue twisters – along with variations to aid differentiation. When prompting, issue clear, specific instructions that include the target language and level, grammar or topic focus, level of study and style (if needed). For example – '*Generate a 200-word story about a holiday for* [level] [target language] *students, including 10 different adjectives. Include 5 comprehension questions and a task where students need to identify all the adjectives.*'

2. BE SURE TO SHARE

Team up with colleagues to share new and existing resources for each term or unit of study. Online platforms such as SharePoint or Google Drive can facilitate resource sharing in this way.

3. USE ONLINE RESOURCE PROVIDERS

Consider signing up for a quality resource website such as Twinkl or similar, which offer a wide range of vibrant and up-to-date resources that can save endless hours of creating or searching. You can expect to find numerous worksheets, flashcards, games, and PowerPoint presentation across a range of topics in multiple languages for the price of a coffee and doughnut.

4. SET ASIDE TIME FOR THOSE EMAILS

Don't open your inbox and get drawn into responding when you need to focus on preparing your class or gathering resources. Use your email software's autoreply function to let people know the time windows in which you plan to respond. Consider also using the 'rule' function to automatically sort your emails into specific folders, which can help you prioritise.

5. BE EFFICIENT WITH YOUR MARKING

Streamline your marking feedback by using pre-made rubrics or response grids. Instead of writing full comments on every piece of work, circle or highlight relevant descriptors on the rubric, then add one short, specific comment per student.

Dr Andy Goldhawk teaches on various postgraduate programmes at the University of the West of England, Bristol; his new book, *The Language Teaching Toolkit* (Crown House, 2026), is available now

TRENDING

Our pick of the recent resources and launches teachers might find useful...

BEHIND THE SCENES

Registrations are now open for this year's Open Doors programme – a scheme whereby construction workplaces across the country offer free guided tours of their sites, offices and training centres to young people and aspiring career changers. This year's tours will take place from 23–28 March. **opendoors.construction**

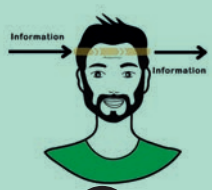
PRIZE TALK

Goldsmiths, University of London has launched a 'Young Podcaster' competition, with a top prize of £500 up for grabs. Entries are open to 16- to 18-year-olds studying at school or college, with submissions taking the form of a three- to five-minute long podcast made in response to a title set by the organisers. The deadline for entries is 17th April 2026. **tinyurl.com/ts152-LL2**

1 MINUTE STUDENT CPD

5 POINTERS FOR RETRIEVAL PRACTICE

ZEPH BENNETT OFFERS SOME ADVICE ON WHAT MAKES RETRIEVAL PRACTICE EFFECTIVE – AND WHAT DOESN'T...



1

YOU CAN'T RETRIEVE MEMORIES THAT AREN'T THERE

Retrieval practice only strengthens memories that already exist. It can't conjure knowledge from nothing, so make sure that students have something worth retrieving.

2

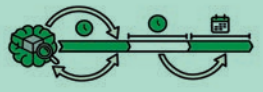
RETRIEVAL PRACTICE SHOULDN'T BE 'AN ACTIVITY'

Retrieval strengthens whatever's being retrieved, essential or trivial; if quizzes target peripheral details, students will learn that those details matter. Retrieval should amplify what the curriculum deems important.

3

RETRIEVAL SUITS CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE MORE THAN OTHERS

Retrieval practice works well for discrete declarative knowledge – definitions, dates, vocabulary – but not for integrative material assembled from complex understanding.



4

IT ONLY WORKS WHEN SPACED

A single quiz is assessment, not retrieval practice. The testing effect requires repeat retrieval across expanding intervals, after enough forgetting to make the effort meaningful.

5

STUDENTS NEED COGNITIVE CAPACITY

Effortful learning works when learners have cognitive resources to spare. When material is complex enough to exhaust working memory, retrieval practice won't strengthen learning, but overwhelm it.

ZEPH BENNETT IS A PE TEACHER AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT LEADER WITH 25 YEARS' TEACHING EXPERIENCE; YOU CAN FIND MORE OF HIS EDUCATIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY FOLLOWING @ZEPHBENNETT.BSKY.SOCIAL

Got a great learning idea? Email editor@teachsecondary.com or tweet us at @teachsecondary

What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

1 Rewarding challenges

CREST is British Science Association's education programme that brings STEM to life for young people of all abilities aged 3 to 19 through hands-on challenges and long-form projects.

On the CREST website you'll find a Resource Library full of activities, plus project ideas for all levels, free to download. Depending on how complex their project is, students (typically those aged 11 and up) can submit a project from the CREST Resource Library or one of their own, and earn a Discovery, Bronze, Silver or Gold CREST Award in the form of a nationally recognised CREST Award certificate. Find out more at **crestawards.org**, or contact **crest@britishscienceassociation.org**.

2 Cultural education

The Specialist Leaders in Cultural Education (SLiCE®) Fellowship is a transformative 18-month CPD programme that brings together school and cultural leaders to drive meaningful, long-term systemic change in cultural education. Designed for senior leaders committed to equity, creativity and strategic impact, SliCE® equips Fellows with the skills, knowledge and connections to become powerful advocates and expert commissioners for cultural education within their own settings.

12 fully-funded places are available for 2026/27, with applications now open. Not ready for a SLiCE® Fellowship quite yet? Our 'Leading the Arts in Your School' CPD programme offers an excellent first step toward strategic cultural leadership, with applications for Cohort 2 now open. For more information, visit **curiousminds.org.uk**.

3 Setting the scene

Save the Shoot is a new free, classroom-ready careers resource from Into Film for students aged 13 to 16. Designed for whole classes or year groups with a wide range of interests, it uses film production as a practical setting to explore real-world careers and transferable skills.

Students work in teams to tackle the kind of challenges found on a real film set – from planning and design, to marketing and decision-making. The focus is on skills that apply across all careers, however, including teamwork, problem-solving, communication and creativity, making it ideal for careers provision, enrichment days or indeed any time of year. For more details, visit **intofilm.org/careers.**

4 Effortless engagement

Imagine a school day where learning feels effortless, engagement comes naturally and teachers have time to focus on what truly matters – their students.That's the reality with Access Education GCSEPod, the digital learning platform built around smart, curriculum-aligned content and powerful AI tools. From assignment creation, marking assistant and lesson planning. GCSEPod can help teachers adapt to student needs while giving teachers actionable insights. It's easy to roll out, simple to use and designed to lift outcomes across the whole school community. Access Education GCSEPod supports progress, empowers teachers and helps every student stay confidently on track. For more information, visit **gcsepod.com**

5 Better inclusive practice

Whole School SEND, through the DfE-funded Universal SEND Services programme, is now offering free 'Online SEND CPD Units' to help strengthen inclusive practice for learners with SEND. The offer includes 20 'Inclusive Practice Units', alongside five 'Autism Units' that focus on communication, sensory differences and supportive learning environments. Designed to fit around busy schedules, each unit takes around one hour to complete and is presented in clear, manageable sections. Units can be completed individually or shared as part of a wider CPD plan, with certificates available to evidence professional development. To find out more, visit **wholeschoolsend.org.uk,** contact **info@wholeschoolsend.org.uk** or visit **wholeschoolsend.org.uk**

6 Cover the career essentials

Looking to bridge the gap between your classroom and future careers? Rise has you covered. Developed in partnership with Causeway Education and Rise partners, our suite of free classroom resources for students aged 11-16 are designed to save you time and enrich your students' learning.

Ideal for use either in class or set as homework, our KS3 and KS4 resources will open your students' eyes to a wide range of industries and job roles, and the essential skills needed to succeed in life and work, while also inspiring them to think about their future careers.

All resources free, with no sign-up required, so download today by visiting **rise-initiative.co.uk/resources**

7 Make May purple

Every day in May, another 240 people will face the life-changing impact of a stroke. For this year's Stroke Awareness Month, we're asking schools across the UK to Make May Purple. You could organise a 'Wear Purple Day', host a bake sale with delicious purple treats or even decorate your classrooms and corridors in purple to raise vital funds and spread awareness.

These activities will also give pupils the chance to learn about what a stroke is, the warning signs to look for and how to build stroke-friendly communities. For further details on how to get involved and order your fundraising pack, visit **stroke.org.uk/sam**.

8 Media literacy you can trust

In a world where anyone can publish anything, young people are growing up in an environment where information is fast, fragmented and not always trustworthy.

The First News TeachKit: MIL makes teaching media and information literacy easy, with clear progressive frameworks, fully resourced schemes of work, dynamic teaching packs and plenty of teacher support. Lessons are updated fortnightly using the latest news – even difficult events – to spark safe, meaningful discussion; visit **firstnews.co.uk/mil** to find out more about how to develop your students as capable and confident consumers, and creators of media and information who will be ready to question, challenge and positively shape the world around them.

9 Improving outcomes

Academy21's GCSE Booster Series provides time-limited interventions to support KS4 learners and boost their chances of exam success. The series includes targeted GCSE Booster courses for progress and confidence, as well as dedicated GCSE Resit Booster courses that offer targeted content for maths and English retakes.

Bespoke Booster groups are also available. Commissioned on-demand, these can provide tailored provision – often for closed cohorts, individual schools or trusts. All sessions are delivered live by subject-specialist teachers and complement in-school delivery. Learn more at **academy21.co.uk**.

10 Transform your sports experience

Looking to enhance your sports facilities this year? Check out education canopy provider Fordingbridge's growing range of all-weather solutions:

- Join the padel boom – adding all-weather padel facilities to your site creates a coveted new facility for students, as well as an exciting new revenue-driving opportunity
- Make existing facilities all-weather: Installing a canopy over existing courts is an investment that reaps instant rewards, enabling your school to hold and host year-round sports lessons, clubs and events
- Encourage fitness – Add covered gym facilities to your playground to encourage students to develop a daily fitness habit

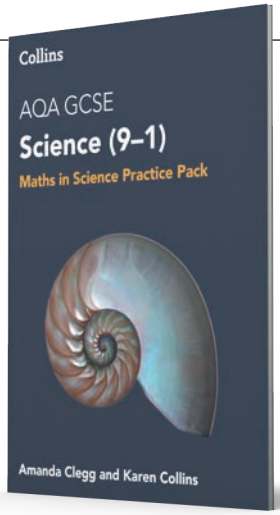
Find out more about Fordingbridge's sector-leading sports solutions today at **fordingbridge.co.uk/sectors/canopies-for-schools**

SCIENCE

Collins

Collins Maths in Science Practice Pack – AQA GCSE Science (9–1)

A practical, well-structured resource for developing maths confidence within science contexts



AT A GLANCE

- **A no-nonsense resource for targeting deficits in applying maths skills in the study of science**
- **Shows how maths skills can be applied to exam-style science problems**
- **Includes an accompanying set of PowerPoint slides for presenting to students**
- **Includes access to downloadable and editable versions of all provided questions, answers and worked examples**

REVIEW BY MIKE DAVIES

"When will I ever use the maths I learnt at school in real life?"

So goes the clichéd question posed by countless comedians and online influencers. When not playing for laughs, though, most of us will readily recognise just how important the appliance of maths is within the study of science. Sadly, however, it would seem that knowledge gained in the maths classroom doesn't always easily transfer across to science lessons, even for those who perform well in the former.

That's an observation supported by research, and one way in which this *Maths in Science Practice Pack* from Collins impresses from the get-go is how its very creation is backed by some of that research, as clearly cited in its introduction.

GCSE and A Level students alike can encounter real blocks when it comes to the maths component of their science exams. It's a problem that's becoming more widely recognised, and one that this resource seeks to address head-on.

Collins' approach involves giving concise descriptions of specific maths skills, providing worked examples for teachers to talk through and then following these with 'faded' examples – a form of scaffolding, in which the steps for solving a problem are gradually removed from the bottom up. The material for each skill area then concludes with a set of problems for students to solve by themselves.

Said skill areas are grouped into five broad categories: 'arithmetic'; 'handling data'; 'algebra'; 'graphs and geometry'; and 'trigonometry'. Each skill is applied separately to each branch of science – biology, chemistry and physics. The worked examples are presented via PowerPoint slides designed with 'stepped reveal' sequences, to support teachers in modelling how to solve them. The pack even includes access to downloadable and fully editable versions of all the questions presented in the main book, the answers to which can be found at the back.

This is no needlessly fluffy and colourful resource. Instead, the emphasis throughout is on clarity, with an overall presentation that's beautifully designed around two key objectives: identifying gaps in students' skill sets, and then targeting those gaps in a direct manner that eliminates all other variables. It's an aptly scientific way of going about things.

My only real regret with this product is that there was nothing like it around when I was at school. While I genuinely enjoyed science, and wasn't too bad at maths, I can still remember being flummoxed by a couple of nasty exam questions that tasked me with applying my maths knowledge to science problems – which is perhaps that's why I ended up becoming a writer, rather than a proper scientist...

teach SECONDARY

VERDICT

✓ A resource that's built upon evidence and focused on solutions
✓ The content is well-structured and easy to follow
✓ Features an admirably clear and direct style of presentation
✓ Targets a genuine need in a streamlined and effective way

PICK UP IF...

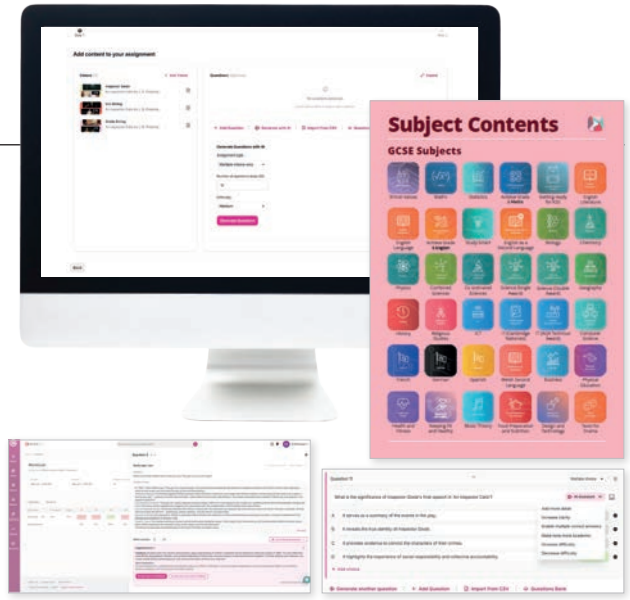
... you want to plug any gaps in your GCSE students' abilities in applying their maths skills to scientific contexts as part of their exam preparations.

RRP £50; for more information, visit collins.co.uk/SecondaryScience

REVISION

Access GCSEPod

A digital learning platform designed to improve students' outcomes while reducing teachers' workload...



AT A GLANCE

- **Ready access to a library of over 13,000 'Pods' that deliver high-impact knowledge in manageable 3-5 minute bursts**
- **All Pods are mapped to specific exam board assessments**
- **Includes a suite of automatic marking and feedback tools**
- **Allows for personalised learning via a 'boost playlists' feature**
- **Comes with a range of accessibility features, including dyslexia-friendly fonts and support for over a hundred different languages**
- **AI Teacher Tools to support marking, assignment creation and lesson planning**

REVIEWED BY: RUTH ASTLEY

Finding homework that grabs students' attention can be both tricky and extremely labour-intensive for teaching staff. Having recently reviewed Access GCSEPod, though, I believe it could make a real difference.

Access GCSEPod is built around a library of over 13,000 'Pods' – concise 3- to 5-minute videos that use clear narration matched to simple, yet effective graphics to deliver revision content across over 30 subjects.

Units are clearly mapped out to include necessary vocabulary, knowledge content and learning and revision tips, and are aligned to all major exam boards. The platform goes much further than simply supporting homework delivery, though. Because of how it's structured, it could also be used as a pre-teaching, revision or consolidation tool, and features built-in opportunities for teachers to develop and plan lessons. The latter will be particularly helpful for non-specialists and cover teachers, ensuring that high-quality content is delivered to students at all times.

With its user-friendly icons and layout, the platform is easy to navigate. Teachers can quickly set learning tasks by choosing from a library of pre-built assignments spanning multiple subjects. Where other platforms will often rely solely on extensive reading and basic multiple choice questions, Access GCSEPod provides a wide variety of tasks, ranging from 'watch and learn' activities to exam-style questions that closely follow the format of actual GCSE papers.

For certain subjects there are also downloadable and printable workbooks with optional answer papers. Teachers can build their own custom assignments with a focus on particular question styles should they wish, or they can opt to use one of the platform's pre-built assessments.

It's the platform's assessment and monitoring areas that stand out the most, however, both of which are designed to maximise the amount of support students receive via a series of automated marking and feedback tools, including a marking assistant and a 'check and challenge' function. Multiple choice questions set using GCSEPod are marked instantly, thus giving children on-the-spot feedback there and then, and include scaffolded support.

Teachers will meanwhile appreciate how the reporting and monitoring dashboard affords detailed insights into students' engagement levels, with the option to filter results by class, gender, or time period. This lets you ensure that no knowledge gaps get missed, and that any interventions are targeted where they're needed most.

The platform can also automatically generate 'boost playlists' when students struggle with a specific assignment. These are tailored to whichever weakness has been identified and consist of suggestions for further practice and independent study, avoiding the need for teachers to intervene directly.

Also worth noting is how Access GCSEPod can be integrated with Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams for Schools and Students or your school's MIS to enable easy access via a single login.

Access GCSEPod is definitely worthy of closer examination. With its combination of classroom resources, revision tools and assessment features, all instantly available via a single unified platform, it could well be the learning platform, performance booster and workload saver you've been looking for...

VERDICT

- ✓ Offers an impressive range of exam-board aligned content spanning 30+ subjects
- ✓ Its in-depth monitoring tools enable straightforward identification of students' knowledge gaps
- ✓ Includes a range of accessibility tools to help meet the needs of SEND and EAL pupils
- ✓ The platform's visually appealing 'pods' facilitate short, sharp bursts of revision that will grab pupils' attention
- ✓ Can be used in school or at home

UPGRADE IF...

... you want a fully curriculum-aligned digital hub that supports your GCSE classroom delivery in an innovative way.

For more information, visit gcsepod.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
John Lawson is a former secondary teacher, now serving as a foundation governor while running a tutoring service, and author of the book **The Successful (Less Stressful) Student** (Outskirts Press, £11.95); find out more at **prep4successnow.wordpress.com** or follow **@johninpompano**

THE LAST WORD

"Decency personified"

John Lawson looks back on the standards and example set by an inspirational colleague...

Every school needs a Mr Crossley.

Considering he was a head of KS3 pastoral care who rarely raised a word in anger to anyone, he had a slightly ironic name. Instead, he followed a carefully crafted pastoral philosophy that served his school exceptionally well for more than 25 years. Crossley was decency personified, a 'rebel thinker' and scrupulous practitioner who turned pastoral care into a science.

He radiated warmth, and eloquently disavowed scornful judgments of children, regarding purely punitive sanctions as performative or vengeful responses. Caring discipline was the essence of his nurturing management style, believing that the aggressive behaviour of troubled teens was better addressed by caritas, guidance and benevolence, rather than belligerence. '*Stop shouting and try talking*' was his mantra – for Crossley was also a world-class listener.

Sowing seeds

Every year, he would address KS3 teachers with talks that were memorably wise, witty and pithy. Crossley would insist that no Y7 student should ever treat adults disrespectfully, lest it irreparably harm that child. If they did, he would want every such incident to be promptly reported, and proceed to ensure that they rarely ever reoccurred.

His firm belief was that Y7 was the prime time in which to sow seeds of self-control and self-pride. During his weekly 15-minute assemblies he would dedicate time and energy to championing as many children as possible for their efforts.

Students were asked to stand and accept enthusiastic applause from their peers for anything from acing a test, to performing random acts of kindness, to helping school teams win in various contests.

As a devout Roman Catholic, he also organised daily services, once visiting my classroom and warmly commending 18 students who had accepted my challenge to attend a 7:30am mass in the school chapel with the following words:

"*I want you children to know that when I saw you in the chapel this morning, you brought joyful tears to my eyes. Thank you for making this old man so happy and proud. Showing such respect and reverence for our Creator is the highest form of kindness. May God bless you, always.*"
They glowed with pride.

Pitch-perfect inspiration

I'm not sure how Crossley managed to arrange it, but the first day of school was for Y7 students only. I was always impressed by how pitch-perfect and inspiring his speeches were for our newcomers. He told them of his delight to be welcoming such lovely young people to England's finest secondary school; of how this marvellous school – *your* school, he insisted – would be even better at the end of the year, when "*You wonderful children have made your unique contribution to our school's outstanding ethos of success.*" No threats were issued about poor behaviour, though he would politely emphasise that he never tolerated any bullying or disrespect directed at staff, '*including our amazing maintenance team, caterers and office staff*'.

He was a truly gentle man that passionately believed in his students – who in turn never wanted to let him down. When one mischievous lad let himself down around mid-May, he was suspended for a week. Nobody mistook Mr Crossley's kindness for softness.

On the student's first day back, Mr. Crossley put me in mind of the forgiving father from the parable of the prodigal son, waiting at the front gate to warmly welcome him back.

'The past' in pastoral care really was the past. "*We learn from our mistakes,*" he would say, "*and march proudly into the future*".

What made Crossley such a brilliant leader is that he understood what 'pastoral care' actually entailed in practice. "*Give us your child until the end of Y7*", he said, "*and we will give you back a respectful young adult.*"

The (very few) students who were expelled from the school couldn't complain that Crossley ever let them down.

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