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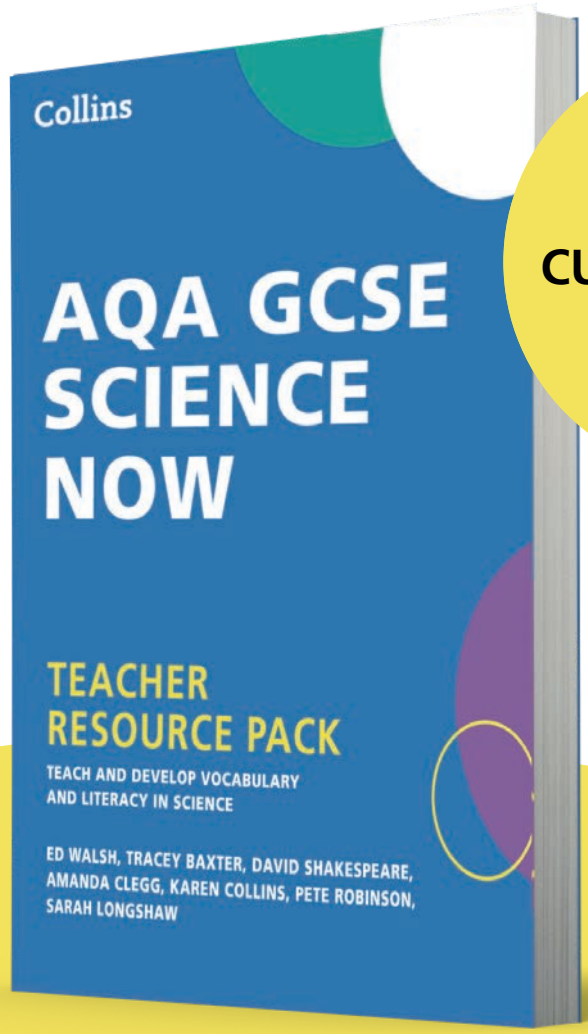

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FROM THE EDITOR

"Welcome...

It's a question that *should* have an obvious answer, but nonetheless one I've found myself asking more and more lately – *what are we teaching* ***for***? Not the content of the curriculum, or the structure of lessons, valid topics for discussion though those are. I mean the actual purpose of teaching itself. Given all the knowledge, resourcing and effort that goes into providing children and young people with an education, what's our actual goal here?

Because I don't know about you, but when I switch on the news these days, or go online, it can often feel as though our systems of governance and wider media ecosystem are actively working against many of the basic values, principles and moral lessons that teachers presumably want students to take away with them into adulthood.

It's bad enough when news breaks of yet another violent atrocity perpetrated by an individual acting alone. What makes it so much worse is the spasm of social media finger-pointing that now routinely follows those chaotic initial reports – was the perpetrator on 'our team' or 'one of them?' School students are taught the importance of keeping a cool head, establishing the facts and not letting things spiral after silly altercations in the playground. Our supposedly grown-up keyboard warriors have evidently either forgotten such lessons, or now wish to actively subvert them.

Then there's the seemingly unstoppable encroachment of AI into the search engines and websites we all use. We ask students to cite their sources, weigh up evidence, corroborate their findings. Our tech overlords suggest that we simply scan their AI-produced (and source-obfuscating) summaries before moving on. Oh, and let's not forget that these are the same people who thought nothing of unleashing assessment-breaking, essay generation 'tools' on the world, and making them free to use.

Now, *to be fair*, we can, as Anthony David suggests on page 40, meet the implications of AI head-on by embracing what humans are best at, and become a better version of ourselves. We could also, as pointed out by Andrew K. Shenton on page 33, familiarise younger generations with the tell-tale signs of disinformation as early as possible. And if we're looking for a reason to keep going, the deeper 'whys' of what we do, then as Andy McHugh points out on page 66, a good RE teacher can do much to encourage the kind of moral interrogation and self-reflection the world could really do with right now.

Yes, there's plenty of fear, recrimination and irresponsibility around at the moment, and it's not going away any time soon, but it can be resisted. And that's why we teach.

Enjoy the issue,

Callum Fauser
callum.fauser@theteachco.com

On board this issue:

Andrea Miller is a lead practitioner of English

Anthony David is an executive headteacher

Hannah Day is a head of art, media and film

Kit Betts-Masters is a lead practitioner for science

Ama Dickson is a maths teacher

Andy McHugh is a head of RE

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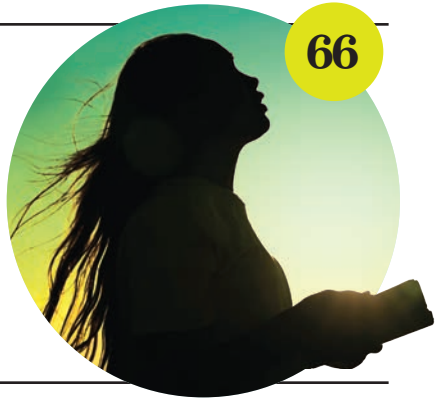

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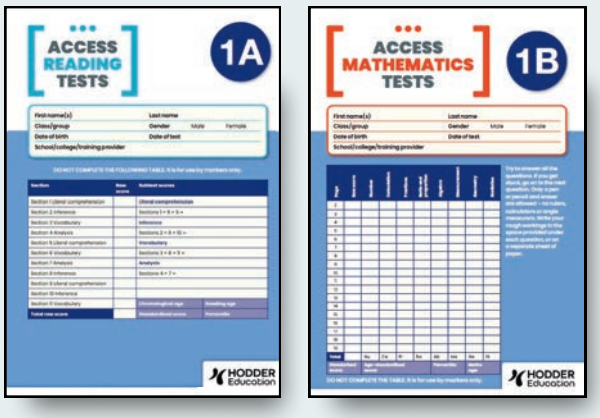

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The newsletter

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

The UNINFORMED teacher's guide to...

YEET

This one's a bit of a slow burn, and something that a few of you may have already encountered a while ago, but it seems like an appropriate time to acknowledge the growing use of this splendidly pithy term for 'throw with considerable force'.

As is so often the case with emergent slang in the post-internet age, accounts vary as to where it came from, but the general consensus, insofar as there is one, seems to suggest that it originated in African American vernacular, before rapidly spreading via all the usual social media conduits some time around the mid-2010s.

But why 'yeet?' Is it meant to be onomatopoeic? A contraction of some kind? Who knows. All that really matters is that it's a modern grassroots word which, for once, isn't an obnoxious insult, or designed to make the uninitiated feel affronted, or old or both (I'm looking at you, 'rizz'). It's just a quick, punchy (and if appropriately deployed, very funny) way of referring to a simple action that we're all familiar with. And that's lovely.

DO SAY
"He only went and yeeted that ball into the sun!"

DON'T SAY
"What shall I do with this absurdity..."

BEAT THE BUDGET

What are we talking about?
The Barclays LifeSkills Investment Resource Hub

Who is it for?
KS4/5 students

What's on offer?
Four lesson plans and accompanying resources – including an explanatory video and a fully playable board game – aimed at familiarising 16- to 19-year-olds with the processes and risks involved in making business investments.

Where is it available?
tinyurl.com/ts145-NL1

WHAT THEY SAID...

"We see more immediate benefits and fewer risks from teacher-facing use of generative AI"

– DfE policy paper, 'Generative artificial intelligence (AI) in education'

Think of a number...

45,000

PE hours have disappeared from secondary school timetables since the London 2012 Olympics

Source: '2025 PE and School Sport Report' produced by Youth Sport Trust

30%
of students state that attending a school trip influenced their choice of GCSE options
Source: 'School Trip Index Report' produced by PGL Beyond

2,500
general and special needs classroom assistants are employed on temporary contracts after working in their roles for more than four years
Source: Unite

ONE FOR THE WALL

"Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible"

– Maya Angelou

An issue of substance

Drugs, alcohol, energy drinks and gambling apps – according to the NASUWT, all are being regularly consumed and accessed by school students, and contributing to worsening behaviour issues.

According to survey responses from 4,000 NASUWT members, the chief concern most commonly cited by leaders and teachers was excessive consumption of energy drinks, both inside and outside school. Next on the list was cannabis use, with 19% of respondents being aware of students using the drug while at school, and 57% knowing of students using the drug outside of school.

Placing third was use of nicotine pouches and snus, with 13% knowing of students using said substances in school, and 30% outside of school.

Even more alarming was the 'other drugs' category, including use of cocaine and ketamine, with 5% of respondents aware of them being used by students while on school premises.

Commenting on the findings, acting NASUWT general secretary Matt Wrack said, "*Not only are many of these activities illegal or prohibited for young people aged under 18, they are contributing to the rise we are seeing in disruptive, violent and abusive behaviour in schools…*

"*This is clearly not an issue that schools can solve alone. We need greater action from government and other expert services to help deter young people from using or accessing illegal or prohibited substances or activities and causing harm to themselves or others.*"

SAVE THE DATE

SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

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

THE SPEECH:

Education Secretary calls for action on absence

WHO? Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education
WHERE? Regional conference of education leaders, Birmingham
WHEN? 4th June 2025

"1 in 5 children are persistently absent from our schools. That's 1.5 million, missing roughly a day every other week. This isn't a side issue, it's not a niche problem to talk about in between the big education conversations. This is the big education conversation.

Parents have the responsibility to send their children to school. Of course they do. But what schools do matters too. We can see it in the data. Because within local authorities or trusts there are similar schools facing similar challenges, but with very different records on attendance. Some [are] doing really well. But in others we need to see more progress.

About two thirds of the difference can be explained by things like where the schools are and the communities they serve. And I'm sure a bit reflects the complexities of schooling that we just can't measure. But there is a chunk – a big chunk – that is under the control of school leaders. The data is clear – your leadership matters.

And we're arming you with that data. You now have access to AI-powered reports for each of your schools. You can see how each school's performance compares with 20 similar schools, as well as tailored tips for how to get attendance moving again.

You can make a big difference on attendance, you can make a big difference in the lives of those absent children. And as far as I'm concerned, that's not just an opportunity, it's a responsibility – one that I sincerely hope you can live up to."

THE RESPONSE:

ASCL comments on Spending Review

FROM? Julia Harnden, deputy director of policy at ASCL
REGARDING? The Chancellor of the Exchequer's June 2025 Spending Review
WHEN? 11th June 2025

"The capital funding commitment is welcome as far as it goes, but it will not be enough to make significant inroads into the huge backlog of repairs and maintenance across the school and college estate because of many years of underfunding. There is also a major challenge in terms of reforming the SEND system to ensure it is sustainable in the future and delivers the support that children and young people need. The government will need to ensure there is sufficient funding in place to deliver these reforms."

3-4 JULY 2025 Festival of Education | 18-19 OCTOBER 2025 Battle of Ideas Festival | 19-20 NOVEMBER 2025 Schools & Academies Show

3-4 JULY 2025

Festival of Education
Wellington College, Crowthorne
educationfest.co.uk

Back for a 15th year, this annual gathering of educators will once more host a series of thought-provoking discussions and engaging speakers across 40 on-site locations. As the name suggests, this really is a 'festival', giving visitors opportunities to share their ideas, experiences and practice with teachers from across the country within relaxed indoor and outdoor surroundings.

18-19 OCTOBER 2025

Battle of Ideas Festival
Church House, London
battleofideas.org.uk

Final details are yet to be confirmed by the Academy of Ideas, organisers of this annual debating and networking event, but we can reasonably expect another two days of bold, impassioned and at times provocative rhetorical jousting on a range of topical subjects across a series of panels – including a number of topics likely to be of particular interest to educators and older students.

19-20 NOVEMBER 2025

Schools & Academies Show
The NEC, Birmingham
schoolsandacademiesshow.co.uk

Aimed at MAT and school senior leaders, the '#SAASHOW' will be once again be setting up shop at the NEC, Birmingham this autumn for two days of CPD centred on strategy and school improvement, and opportunities for learning from fellow leaders and managers. As always, there'll also be a sizeable and thoughtfully curated exhibition floor hosting numerous suppliers and solution providers.

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TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

Uniform, please...

While patrolling the school's 'out of bounds area', I encountered a young female and asked her why she was there, and wearing a plain black jumper, rather than one bearing the school logo.

"*Oh, I'm sorry,*" she replied. "*I didn't think those rules applied to supply teachers!*"

Zip it

Once, whilst on greeting duties at parent's evening, my zip fly decided to break.

I therefore conducted my six upcoming interviews with great care. At the end of each, I stood and shook hands whilst strategically positioning my jacket over the offending area.

During our staff break, I managed to locate a long-arm stapler and a box of brass staples and attempted temporary repairs down the front of my trousers and up along the zip. My trousers now looked like the product of a botched surgery, but it would do. I went to sit back down, ready for my next interview – but as I bent over to take my seat, a shower of brass staples ensued.

As the evening drew to a close, one concerned parent approached me and asked if all was well, having seen me bent double when leaving the hall earlier. I confided in him about my troublesome zip, to which he responded, "*Oh, that's okay then – several parents thought you had the runs...*"

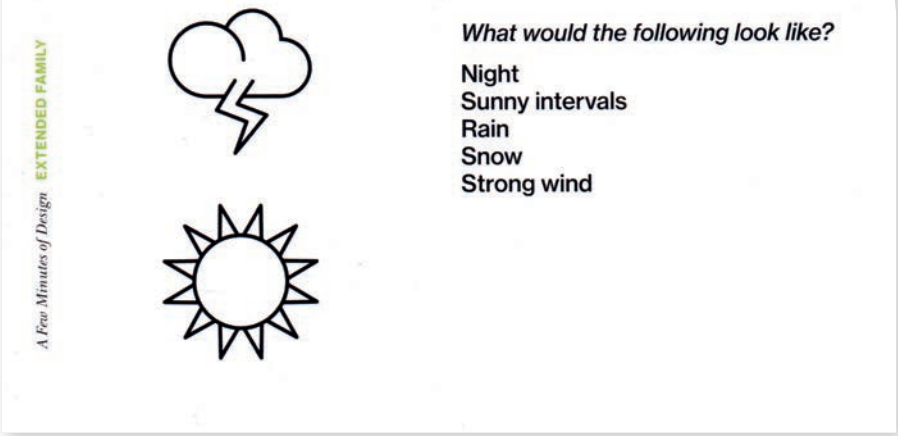
Have a memorable true school tale or anecdote of your own? Share the details, and find more amusing stories, at schoolhumour.co.uk

A FEW MINUTES OF DESIGN

#36 EXTENDED FAMILY

Look at family of symbols below. How have the pictures been simplified to make symbols? Are they made of solid shapes or lines? What visual features does each one use? What makes them a family?

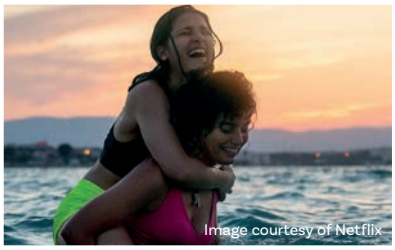
Draw your own symbols to continue the series, keeping the same visual 'language' of simplification, line, shape and style as the original members. Then draw a symbol that does *not* belong to the family.



What would the following look like?

Night
Sunny intervals
Rain
Snow
Strong wind

Get Into Film



THE SWIMMERS (2022, 15, 134 MINUTES)

CURRICULUM LINKS:
Geography, physical education

Sara and Yusra Mardini are sisters living in Damascus, Syria, juggling regular teenage life with intensive training as professional swimmers, hoping to one day compete in the Olympic Games.

But as war breaks out, Sara and Yusra make the difficult decision to leave their family and travel to Europe as refugees. The journey proves incredibly dangerous, but even as they finally reach safety, their challenges aren't yet over, as the sibling drama sparked by their different priorities soon starts to intensify...

Based on a remarkable true story, this dramatic and uplifting portrayal of sport and girlhood rings out with empowerment.

Discussion questions:
- What do you know about the European refugee crisis, and its origins?
- How is music used to emphasise the film's central themes of sisterhood and determination?

Head online to intofilm.org to stream this film for free and download its film guide, including Teacher's Notes

Like and subscribe

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

Becky Francis @beckyfrancis.bsky.social
Feeling sympathy for the magpie parents teaching their kids to fly in my back garden. They are modelling beautifully – repeating a short flap from said kids to a low section of our fence – but kids are studiously ignoring, continuing to waddle about and peck in our rockery. We've all been there!

Omar Khan @omaromalleykhan.bsky.social
29% of children on free school meals attend university. Over 7 in 10 do not. Some think that's too few FSM children in higher education. Others are coy about admitting it, but clearly think it's too many. Not everyone should go to university, but all should be enabled to make that choice.

Follow us via @teachsecondary (X) and @teachsecondary.bsky.social

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Maths Learning Difficulties screening tools and strategies.

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Learn why SENCOs call SNAP their 'Go-To Tool'.

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HODDER Education

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

Do you sometimes get the impression that you've already heard or felt something, but can't place where? To describe that feeling you might employ the term '*déjà vu*' – which literally translates as 'already seen'. To linger for a moment on the theme of memory, tourists wanting to imprint the good times they've had into their memory will often buy physical items that they can take home. We call such items 'souvenirs', from the French word for memory. Those wanting to immortalise their thoughts in words may do so by recording their *pensées* (French for thoughts) into a 'memoir' – a term deriving from the French word '*mémoire*', meaning 'long term memory'.

TEACHING TIP: LET'S HAVE A WORD

Many teachers will have shared with students that amusing line about how punctuation can save lives, demonstrating it with the sentence '*Let's eat, grandma*' – but how many of us realise that a sentence can have several meanings *without* changing its punctuation?

It could be down to the presence of polysemous words (words with more than one meaning), as in "*I want a match.*" Grammatically dissecting sentences can help us better understand how grammar is used for meaning. The process is called 'parsing' – a grammatical decoupage of sentences into branch-like diagrams.

Consider the sentence, "*I discussed going on holiday with my colleagues*". It could have two meanings, depending on whether you treat going on holiday and 'with my colleagues' as one block or two different ones. Parsing sentences is also great for visually illustrating why certain sentences sound clumsy or cumbersome. A left-leaning formation will be more ponderous, as it will generate more cognitive load.

As Stephen Pinker explains in his book on modern writing, *A Sense of Style*, "*Elegant and efficient writing can be taught explicitly, and grammar is a fantastic tool for this.*"

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

It's funny how the terms 'populist' and 'democrat' can carry very different meanings while etymologically meaning the same thing – as if a Latin origin gives a word a more vulgar meaning than its Hellenic cousin. But how should we, as educators, approach vocabulary? Should we try to *popularise* or *democratise* academic language?

The latter term implies making it more accessible, while the first seems to be more about making it 'fancy'. A word such as 'facetious' isn't inherently any more complex than 'cheeky' and 'sassy' (spelling notwithstanding).

Social construction is what usually separates Tier 1 and Tier 2 words. Word usage is inevitably affected by the vagaries of history, which is why relatively few primary school children would have known the word 'pandemic' before 2020. My own son was using the term 'sarcastic' fairly early on – not because he was linguistically precocious, but simply because he heard it often.

To demonstrate the relevance of Tier 2 words such as 'gratuitous', 'levity', 'frivolous', I've variously used the subtitles of popular Netflix series, online reviews of video games and video clips of young stand-up comedians and influencers, thus showing how academic language is ubiquitous across all media, and not just the preserve of more conventional literature.

We educators foster the language pupils hear in the classroom, but we also imbue the words we teach with positive or negative connotations. If you explicitly teach academic words, but rarely use any when addressing students, they'll see through it. Sometimes, what we *don't* say can speak volumes.

SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS

Emptying the air in a chamber creates a **vac**uum

To e**vac**uate a building means to empty it of its occupants

Vacating one's mind of stress amounts to freeing it of worries and concerns

LESSONS LEARNED

The adoption 10 years ago of a more linear structure for A Levels transformed KS3/4 teaching for the better, argues **Neil Davenport**

September 2025 will mark the 10th anniversary of A Levels returning to a linear structure, after more than a decade of modular assessment. Under the old modular system, students would work through discrete units, often with the option to resit exams across the two-year course.

The reformed linear model, by contrast, demanded that students would need to sit all required assessments at the end – thus testing their mastery of the full syllabus in one comprehensive set of final exams.

Academic excellence

During his tenure as Education Secretary, Michael Gove was openly critical of Curriculum 2000-based A Levels, arguing that they failed to prepare students for the rigour and independence of higher education. His reforms were designed to restore academic depth by fostering a more sustained form of engagement with the subject content.

In a twist that raised eyebrows at the time, it was a Conservative Minister who insisted that A Level politics should include the compulsory study of Marxism – an unlikely endorsement of critical theory in the name of intellectual seriousness. Yet this move actually exemplified Gove's broader strategy, by demonstrating that academic excellence – rather than ideological convenience – should be at the heart of schooling.

Gove was politically astute, in that he understood how many parents and progressive educators – despite their wariness of Conservative reforms – remained committed to high standards, and were becoming increasingly frustrated by what they perceived as grade inflation and content dilution.

I began teaching when the modular system was first rolled out in the early 2000s. Among the most noticeable changes at this time was a shift away from requiring students to master a substantial body of knowledge. Exams became shorter, less demanding and more formulaic. Long-form responses that required extended reasoning, synthesis of ideas and nuanced argument became increasingly rare.

> **"What began as a change to post-16 assessment ended up reshaping the wider curriculum landscape"**

The reintroduction of linear A Levels in 2015 was a deliberate attempt to reverse this trend, reviving the expectation that students should build deep, cumulative knowledge and demonstrate sophisticated levels of understanding.

Deep and rigorous

Now, 10 years on, the current Labour government has shown no intention of reversing those reforms. On the contrary, Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson recently reaffirmed the value of a "*Deep and rigorous curriculum*" in a speech to the Centre for Social Justice. Her comments suggest that the principles behind the linear A Level model – rigour, coherence and knowledge – have now achieved broad political consensus.

This points to the deeper legacy left by those reforms. What began as a change to post-16 assessment ended up reshaping the wider curriculum landscape. The linear A Level helped normalise the idea that academic challenge should be central to not just sixth form, but across the whole of secondary education. Gove's reforms may have initially targeted the upper end of the system, but they quickly became a lightning rod for broader curricular and pedagogical change – a change which, I would argue, has transformed teaching and learning across KS3-4 for the better.

At its core, the linear A Level model has been about more than assessment structure. It's underpinned by a distinct curriculum philosophy; that students should be taught a rich body of knowledge, which is revisited and reinforced over time, and then assessed in a way that encourages holistic understanding. This is in direct opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy of the early 2000s, which assumed that knowledge was secondary to skills, and that a 'differentiated' or 'accessible' curriculum (often a euphemism for less challenging content) was the best route to success for disadvantaged students.

In fact, research and classroom experience have shown the opposite to be true. Disadvantaged pupils are often the ones who benefit most from a demanding, knowledge-rich curriculum. Sociologists have long argued that working class students tend to arrive at school with less cultural and linguistic capital than their more advantaged peers, but too often this analysis drifts into educational fatalism, treating social inequality as a reason to lower expectations. What this approach overlooks is the core mission of state education – to equip *all* pupils, regardless of background, with the intellectual tools needed to thrive.

An engine of opportunity

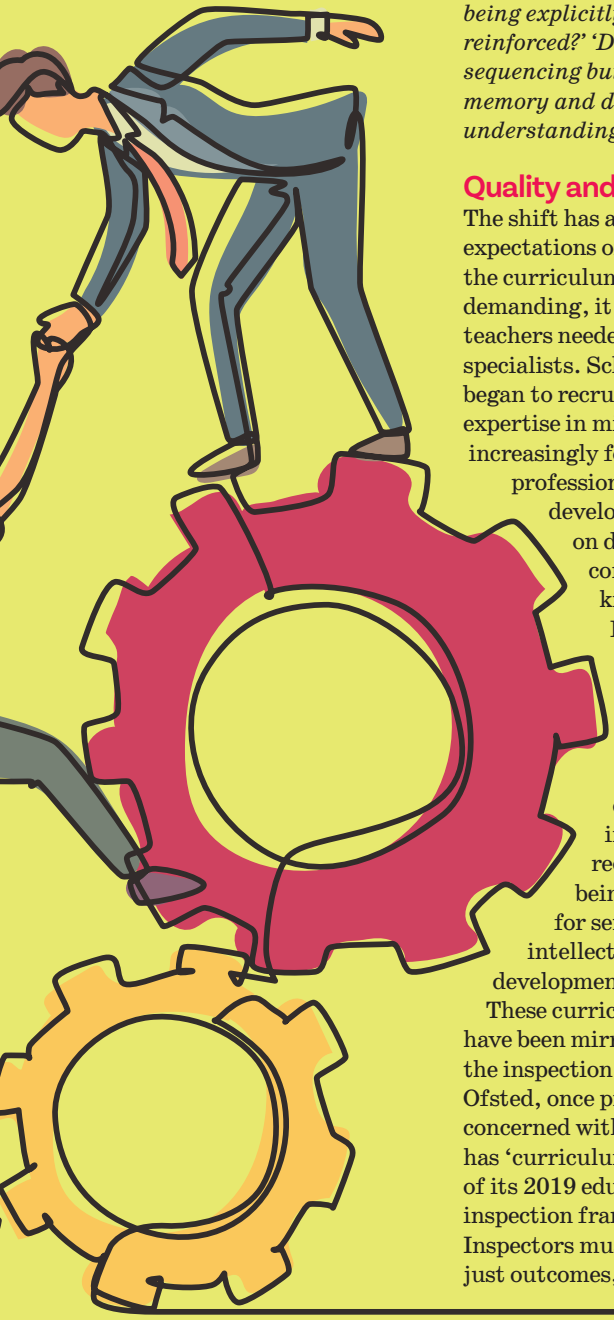
The reformed A Levels helped to reassert that mission. Schools began to recognise their duty to not just raise results, but also to build intellectual confidence, subject fluency and academic vocabulary. Education was once again framed as an engine of opportunity, rather than a system of gatekeeping.

The impact wasn't confined to sixth form. A subsequent restructuring of GCSEs following the same linear

model similarly saw the abolition of modular assessments and reintroduction of final exams at the end of Y11, prompting a shift in curriculum planning at KS3 in response. Although some schools continue to use Y9 as a preliminary GCSE year, many now defend the integrity of a full three-year KS3, and use it to embed foundational knowledge, build cultural literacy and ensure breadth and balance.

In subjects such as history, geography and English, pupils are now expected to engage in extended writing and high-level analysis from Y7 onwards. In history, for example, a Y7 unit might trace the development of the English state from the Norman Conquest to the Reformation, making use of both primary sources and secondary scholarship.

This raising of the academic bar has redefined what meaningful curriculum planning looks like. As a middle leader, I've seen how department reviews have evolved. Instead of being limited to spreadsheets and progress charts, curriculum scrutiny now asks, *'Is the content sufficiently challenging?' 'Is vocabulary being explicitly taught and reinforced?' 'Does the sequencing build long-term memory and deep understanding?'*



Quality and coherence

The shift has also raised expectations of teachers. As the curriculum became more demanding, it followed that teachers needed to be subject specialists. Schools therefore began to recruit with subject expertise in mind, while increasingly focusing their professional development efforts on deepening content knowledge. Pedagogy remains essential, but the era of 'teaching skills over content' is increasingly recognised as being inadequate for serious intellectual development.

These curriculum changes have been mirrored across the inspection regime. Ofsted, once primarily concerned with data, now has 'curriculum' at the heart of its 2019 education inspection framework. Inspectors must assess not just outcomes, but also the quality and coherence of the curriculum. These priorities closely align with the values of the post-2015 A Level reforms – that *what* we teach students matters just as much as how well students perform on paper.

A decade after their reintroduction, linear A Levels have helped us challenge the assumption that rigour and inclusion have to be mutually exclusive, and crucially, reminded us that academic excellence, far from being 'elitist', is in fact the most powerful form of social justice we can offer.

Consolidate and build

There's evidence that these changes are making a positive difference, with England's position in international education rankings having improved in recent years. According to the most recent PISA results, England performs above the OECD average in reading, maths and science. In reading, it ranked 13th globally; in science, 13th, and in maths, 11th – thus indicating a marked improvement since 2018.

At primary level, England's 10-year-olds are ranked 4th in the world for reading in the PIRLS 2021 survey – their highest ever position. Yes, many different factors will have contributed to those outcomes, but it's difficult to ignore the role played by a more academically robust and coherent curriculum.

As we look to the future, the task for school leaders, teachers and policymakers is to consolidate and build on this legacy. That means continuing to invest in curriculum design, subject-specific CPD and high quality resources. It means defending the principle that a rigorous curriculum isn't a barrier to equity, but rather the best route to it.

Above all, it means remaining committed to the idea that *knowledge empowers*. Every child, regardless of background, deserves access to the best that's been thought, said and written. It's our responsibility to ensure they obtain it.

IN BRIEF

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?
As the government prepares to ready its long-awaited Curriculum Review, we should remember how the 2015 A Level reforms did much to change KS3/4 teaching for the better.

WHAT'S BEING SAID?
The current Labour government would seem to agree, with Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson having publicly expressed her support for a '*Deep and rigorous curriculum*'.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING?
The 'knowledge-rich curriculum' model has improved academic outcomes, as shown by England's PISA and PIRLS rankings, while also refocusing Ofsted's inspection priorities in a more positive direction, towards the content of what students learn.

THE TAKEAWAY
By refining and building on knowledge-rich approaches, rather than lowering academic standards in the name of 'inclusion', we can provide a more equitable experience of education for every student in our class.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Neil Davenport is a freelance writer and head of faculty of social sciences at a co-ed comprehensive school in Middlesex

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TEA AD 0098 06/25

The profession at large has some clear and eminently practical proposals for a better system of school accountability – so why isn't Labour taking notes?

Melissa Benn

The current Labour government has every reason to feel confident. It has a majority large enough to do what it wishes, and four years remaining to withstand the possible short-term unpopularity of any of its measures.

Yet the decision to rescind the winter fuel cut, and the ongoing vacillations over the two-child cap on benefits, suggest a government that's somewhat in disarray – at least in terms of its core purposes.

The tipping point

On the face of it, education seems to be one area in which Labour has been relatively courageous. It has stuck to its policy of ending the VAT exemption on private school fees, and withstood some withering (and cleverly orchestrated) attacks from right-leaning critics on its Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Funding for schools has also seen something of an increase.

And yet, as I've argued here and elsewhere, this is a government whose hands remain tightly tied by too many of the damaging developments of the Coalition and Conservative years. It's presently facing a big test on Ofsted reform – an area where the views of professionals and the wider public have gradually converged. (see tiny.cc/ts145-MB1 for more details).

The tragic suicide of primary headteacher Ruth Perry in January 2023 was a crucial tipping point for many, who had long seen the inspection system as overtly harsh and increasingly unfit for purpose. The decision in April this year to make former HMCI Amanda Spielman a Conservative peer caused further anger, with many labelling it an 'insult' to the profession.

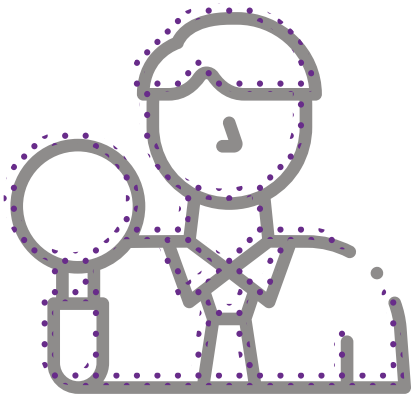
'Cliff edge' concerns

As Shadow Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson promised reform, including replacing Ofsted's reviled single-word judgements with a more inclusive 'report card' system. Following Labour's 2024 election win, Ofsted was duly tasked with devising a new set of proposals under the fresh leadership of Sir Martyn Oliver.

Published in February 2025, those proposals included a plan for no less than *five* new sub-grades of judgement, with schools offered a complex and unwieldy 'toolkit' for working out what was to be expected of them (see tiny.cc/ts145-MB2). The profession was then given just two months in which to respond, with the government having signalled its wish for the new system to be up and running by November this year.

The matter still looks to be far from settled, however. An open letter signed by all the main teaching unions and a number of teaching professionals condemned the proposals (see tinyurl.com/ts145-MB3). The former headteacher and Chair of the New Visions for Education Group, Sir Alasdair Macdonald, has argued that, "*The proposed system still visits schools and passes judgements on them in too little time and on too little meaningful data, without having any responsibility for the actions that follow*."

Speaking to heads, many believe that the plans will lead to the same 'cliff edge' concerns, along with the constant risk that one unfavourable Ofsted report could spell the end of a long and hitherto successful career.



It's not as if there aren't any alternative approaches. The year-long 'Beyond Ofsted' inquiry (beyondofsted.org.uk), for example, has suggested that every school conduct its own ongoing performance reviews, while working closely with a School Improvement Partner to address any perceived areas of weakness. It has also proposed that safeguarding be considered as a separate category, and that inspectors should have prior experience in the areas of school leadership, improvement and/or governance. (Full disclosure – I was a member of the inquiry.)

The Association of School and College Leaders, meanwhile, has come up with its own more streamlined and potentially fairer scheme for school accountability (see tinyurl.com/ts145-MB4).

A genuine reset

This ongoing saga leaves the government with some important decisions to make. We're constantly told that our public services require not just cash, but also reform – but what kind of reform?

We're currently being presented with the chance to enact a genuine reset of our school system – one that would end overly punitive forms of accountability, while addressing a series of deeper problems regarding recruitment, retention and morale. At the same time, we could implement urgently needed reforms to school admissions, exams and qualifications.

The return of a Labour government with a substantive majority offers a once-in-a generation chance to reject the approach of successive Conservative administrations. Sending these proposals back, and devising a more collaborative inspection system would be an excellent start.

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

REASONS TO TRY...

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Find out how this provider of tried and tested learning programmes can help boost your students' outcomes in reading and maths

30 SECOND BRIEFING

Daisy Education (the new name for Reading Solutions UK) is the exclusive UK provider of DreamBox Reading Plus. We've supported over 1 million students in improving their reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension – and now we're excited to offer DreamBox Maths.

1 SAME MISSION, FRESH IDENTITY

After more than a decade as Reading Solutions UK, we're proud to reintroduce ourselves as Daisy Education. Our new name reflects our growing role in supporting schools, including the launch of DreamBox Maths in the UK.

What hasn't changed is our commitment to personalised learning, collaborative school partnerships, and free, ongoing support—so teachers can focus on what matters most: teaching.

We support schools with trusted adaptive programmes:

- DreamBox Reading Plus – boosts fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- DreamBox Maths – teaches primary level Maths, building confidence and core maths skills.

2 PERSONALISED READING SUPPORT THAT WORKS

DreamBox Reading Plus is a trusted online reading development programme that accelerates reading progress. Designed for all learners, it helps close reading gaps while stretching higher attainers through personalised learning pathways. Students access age-appropriate, ability-level texts that build fluency, comprehension, vocabulary and cultural capital across the curriculum. Teachers gain valuable insights through easy-to-use progress data and reports to inform targeted teaching.

"Students are better prepared for KS4... and believe they have the ability to do so." – Alison Smith, Ulverston Victoria High School

Daisy Education

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3 PROVEN RESULTS

DreamBox Reading Plus is an evidence-based programme and trusted by over 1,600 schools nationwide. In partnership with Derby Research School and Spencer Academies Trust, students using the programme made significantly more progress than non-users—including boys, EAL, SEND and students eligible for pupil premium. An independent evaluation from Education Alliance Finland rated the pedagogy 95% (outstanding), and we're currently participating in a trial with the Education Endowment Foundation.

4 IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT AT EVERY STEP

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To keep the momentum going all year round, we also run regular national challenges and engagement initiatives to further inspire students and celebrate success.

5 THE INTERNATIONAL READING CONFERENCE

Join us for the International Reading Conference 2025 – a free, 3-day online event taking place from 10-12th June. Hosted by TV personality and education expert Baasit Siddiqui, the conference features a range of speakers, including beloved children's author Michael Rosen. Across the event, experts will explore how to:

- Cultivate a strong, whole-school reading culture
- Accelerate students' reading progress and motivation
- Use adaptive technology to support digital reading
- Promote reading for pleasure, reading for learning, and reading for life

Company Timeline

2014 – Reading Solutions UK is founded and adopted by its first school in London; Reading Plus is now implemented in over 1,600 schools.

2021 – DreamBox Learning, a leading education technology provider and pioneer of intelligent adaptive learning, finalises its acquisition of Reading Plus.

2023 – Discovery Education acquires DreamBox Learning and unveils a refreshed DreamBox Reading Plus logo the following year.

2025 – Reading Solutions UK blooms into Daisy Education – a new name offering new products, albeit with the same trusted service.

If a significant proportion of young people are struggling to understand what VE Day is and what it means, that suggests a rethink may be in order when it comes to the teaching of modern history...

Natasha Devon

Last month, research commissioned by LBC and conducted by More in Common revealed that only a third of 18- to 25-year-olds know what VE Day is. This prompted the kind of consternation you'd expect from modern media discourse, with questions asked over whether the young are forgetting about the First and Second World Wars, and if so, what that means for the 'collective memory' of our nation.

I, however, had slightly different thoughts. During my lifetime, I've seen commemorations of VE Day broadly fall into two categories. The first is a kind of twee, 'bunting and cake' occasion, where attendees will revel in a synthetic, yet comforting version of Britishness, of the type we sell to tourists. The second is largely indistinguishable from football hooliganism, and usually involves participants becoming intoxicated, waving flags and crowing about how 'we' won.

Nowhere, however, have I seen public events centred on more thoughtful discussions around what the Allies were actually fighting for – freedom and democracy, lest we forget – and why they had to. And that, in turn, perhaps explains the popularity of contemporary populist political figures who are borrowing their rhetoric straight from the playbook of Hitler and Enoch Powell.

History repeating

In 2025, the far right is surging while marginalised communities are being targeted and scapegoated. We're reportedly on the brink of global conflict once more. Whilst widely believed to be exaggerated for reasons of generating outrage, there's still a statistically significant proportion of British young people who are enthusiastic fans of openly racist, misogynistic and homophobic online influencers.

All this begs the question of whether history simply isn't being taught well enough to enable the general population to notice it repeating itself.

My brilliant history teacher, Mr Biggins, went into a great deal of depth about the period between the two World Wars. I left school knowing that Germany had been in a period of economic decline during the 1930s, and that when working people feel resentful, they can be easily manipulated into turning their anger on 'immigrants' whilst those in power seize on opportunities to engage in serial corruption and self-enrichment.

It was only recently, whilst pondering why everyone else didn't remember being taught that at school, that I actually realised we did the topic at A Level. Though even if it had been at GCSE, pupils had the option of choosing to ditch history from Y9 onwards.

Thin end of the wedge

Samuel, a history teacher at a secondary school in East London, recently told me how, *"In some schools, they teach history chronologically. In Y7 it's the Norman conquest and the Middle Ages. Y8 may then cover the Tudors and Stuart Britain. By Y9, they may get to the Industrial Revolution and slavery."*

I asked at what point they would get to World War II. "*The Holocaust is the only thing that's mandatory to teach on the National Curriculum,"* he said. *"So [many pupils] haven't really had much exposure to marginalised communities, populism, polarisation and the post-truth of the 1930s."*

Holocaust education is, of course, incredibly important. But it's just as important for young people to understand the conditions which led to it, and how to guard against the thin end of the propaganda wedge.

A shrewd move

Samuel went on to tell me how, in his school, they've adopted a different 'thematic' approach: "*By the time [our pupils] get to Y9, they cover the 20th century and call it a 'century of extremes'. Students are equipped to understand how a polarised society can sow the seeds of division and hatred. Everything we teach also emphasises the importance of factual evidence and scrutiny."*

There are, of course, ongoing concerns around the underfunding and de-prioritising of humanities within schools, with Conservative Education Secretaries since 2010 having focussed obsessively on so-called 'core academic' subjects and STEM. It would be a shrewd move if Bridget Phillipson were to take steps to reverse this, as it's never been more important that we teach history, and carefully consider how we go about doing so.

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

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Male models

Gordon Cairns explores what it is to be a male teacher – and whether simply being one can provide teenage boys with a positive role model...

Outside of trying to differentiate themselves from female candidates in an interview situation, do any male teachers actually consider themselves to be role models for the adolescent boys in their classroom? The term 'role model' connotes being exceptional at something, or somehow worth emulating – but is any male teacher worthy of being put on such a high pedestal?

Perhaps it would be more pertinent to ask whether male teachers should be pinned and mounted in a 'museum of education' as examples of a dying breed. From an already low starting base, the numbers of Sirs in school classrooms are dwindling yet further. As recently noted by the Education Secretary, 28,000 teachers have been added to the UK workforce since 2010. Just 533 have been men (see tinyurl.com/ts145-MRM1).

Such is our rarity, the men's toilets in a number of primary schools have become storage areas, or overspills for the ladies. The numbers of male teachers in high schools is falling sharply too.

Masculine qualities

Bridget Phillipson has talked of wanting to redress this gender imbalance by encouraging more male teachers into the profession, while at the same time having us blokes fulfil the function of helping to solve the ongoing crisis in masculinity. As she puts it, "*With toxic online influences on the rise, our boys need strong, positive male role models to look up to. At home, of course, and at school too.*"

Yet it's clearly not enough to just have a bunch of random extra men turn up at a school and expect the boys to put away their toxicity. Perhaps Phillipson is suggesting that men should be hired on their 'role modelability'– though how would you demonstrate that in an interview?

Beyond that, the 'masculine qualities' young men typically value most – sporting ability, attractiveness, popularity, wealth – aren't necessarily always evident across the male teaching community. Younger recruits might possess those first three qualities, but earning a teacher's salary will immediately discount all of us from the latter.

And in any case, are adolescents really going to look for their role models in the *classroom*? A survey from a couple of decades ago suggests not. It found that a third of boys aged 10 to 16 looked for such figures at home, while just over 2% identified a teacher as their role model.

Let's instead focus on that word 'model' – or better still, 'role-modelling' – in relation to behaviour. Over many years of working with adolescent boys who often see the significant male adults in their lives acting confrontationally, I've come to see that by modelling non-aggressive actions, and taking the heat out of conflicts, I'm showing them a *different way of being male*.

A worthwhile conversation

Take the recent Monday morning when a number of boys burst into my classroom, bragging about how brilliantly their football team had played at the weekend, while berating how *garbage* my team were, and always will be. In other situations, I'd defend my club to the hilt – but here, I praised how well their team had played and how good the goals were, then said that my own club performed well too.

By modelling conversations around shared interests, while refusing to escalate their desire to make these confrontational, they will have hopefully enjoyed a more worthwhile and less emotional exchange.

It might be a small step – and plainly won't be enough to threaten the seemingly pervasive influence of Tate *et al* – but repeatedly modelling positive behaviour will, I believe, be ultimately more influential than simply hoping boys will admire their teachers *because they are male*.

Of course, much of the above is about good classroom management. By not shouting or showing anger, and through attempting to resolve conflicts calmly, male and female teachers alike are modelling a calmer way of being. Plus, another advantage of 'role modelling' over 'being a role model' means you don't need to be perfect – the old and shabby can do it, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Gordon Cairns is an English and forest school teacher who works in a unit for secondary pupils with ASD; he also writes about education, society, cycling and football for a number of publications

"Do I have your attention...?"

Colin Foster considers the question of how to get students actively engaged in what they're meant to be learning about

How often have you heard a colleague say, '*If only they were* ***interested...***" or, "*If only they* ***cared...***"?

Teaching a roomful of students who want to learn is what many teachers went into the profession anticipating. Young people can bring so much creativity and intelligence and insight with them –when they want to apply it to their learning. But when they don't, the process of teaching and learning can feel like wading through treacle.

So how can we enable more students, more of the time, to *want* to learn whatever it is that they have to be taught?

Beating boredom

Anyone can get bored – it's by no means exclusively an affliction of the young. It's been rumoured that *even teachers* can occasionally experience brief moments of boredom during staff meetings and professional development sessions...

Most adults will tend to spend the majority of their working lives thinking within a relatively narrow range of topics, which they might have a reasonable chance of being genuinely interested in.

By contrast, up to the age of 16, students will be confronted daily by a bewilderingly wide array of subjects over the course of their time at school – far broader than most adults will encounter as part of the jobs they'll do for most of their lifetime. Can we really expect all of our students to be fascinated by everything they have to study, all of the time? Is that reasonable?

> **"Things don't become interesting by being placed next to something else that is interesting"**

Curriculum breadth is a good thing. We don't want young people to be pigeonholed too soon into narrow areas of learning, slaves to their current interests and kept oblivious of wider possibilities. If a general education is meant to involve learning 'a little about a lot', then 'a mile wide and an inch deep' may be exactly what school education should be. We want students to discover interests that they've never dreamed of, and never would have asked for, had they been allowed to design or curate their own curriculum.

A cynic might even suggest that boredom is, in fact, a feature and not a bug – that the whole point of surviving school is to demonstrate that you have learned to accept doing boring things, and that this is ideal preparation for life.

For me, however, that's an extremely depressing view of education, and its potential to change and enhance young people's lives. We should still want students to be interested in what they learn at school – but how can we achieve that?

Hooking them in

The most common strategy I'm aware of for getting students interested in what we're teaching them is to use their existing interests to hook them into a topic. It sounds like an obvious strategy, but I believe teachers can be surprised and disappointed that it often doesn't seem to work too well.

If, for example, a student likes football, and their maths teacher has to teach them about

percentages, the teacher may well scratch their head all evening, trying to figure out some way of bringing those two things together. Even if they succeed in doing so, the problem remains that what the student likes about football may be the teamwork, being outdoors, the physicality of running around and the competitive nature of the sport. None of which will be present when using percentages to analyse football statistics during a maths lesson.

Indeed, bringing up football during the lesson may simply create a distraction, prompting the learner to gaze wistfully out of the window, wishing that they were *anywhere else* but where they are.

Attempting to generate interest by piggybacking on things learners are already interested in often seems doomed to failure, because 'interest' isn't contagious. Things don't become interesting by being placed next to something else that actually *is* interesting. On the contrary, placing them side-by-side may simply highlight for the student just how much less interesting percentages really are, compared to football.

If someone likes football, and also likes cake, then a football-themed cake might be a great idea for a birthday party. But if someone likes football but doesn't like cake, then a football-themed cake is unlikely to turn them into a cake lover. (And if someone likes cake but not football, it's doubtful that such a cake will cause them to suddenly take an interest in The Beautiful Game.)

Intrinsic interest

Attempts at combining curriculum content with pre-existing interests often seem to backfire – not to mention the fact that this often entails a considerable amount of work, given how a typical class will consist of students with all sorts of different interests. Any time spent by the teacher on trying to make those links will only be diverting them away from digging more deeply into their subject content, and finding the *intrinsic interest* that's there.

People often assume that we're motivated to look more deeply at things that we're already interested in, which I'm sure is true, but the reverse can also apply. We can become motivated to forge interests in new areas when we look at them more deeply.

Right now, you may not be at all interested in butterflies – but if you take the time to study one for a few minutes, you'll see all kinds of fascinating structure, raising many questions while causing you to marvel at the natural world. The interest comes out of the study – not necessarily the other way round.

If this is true, then it perhaps makes more sense for teachers to use their subject expertise to enquire more closely into the things we teach, uncover the intrinsic interest that lies beneath, and then work on communicating that, so that students can share it. This requires us to have the confidence that our subject is worthy of attention, and see it as our job not to 'make it interesting', but to *avoid making it boring*.

Dig deeper

If a science teacher dedicates their evening to writing a rap song about energy, the students may well enjoy their efforts the next day – but they'll be enjoying the performance, rather than the physics. Besides which, the science teacher is probably not really playing to their strengths (i.e. science) in their lesson preparation. Bolting content onto students' existing interests may just dilute their interest in those things.

Instead, we must find the internal hooks within our subjects. What makes energy fascinating in science? Why have scientists focused on it, and thought about it so much for hundreds of years? How does energy make a difference in our lives, shape the societies we live in, affect the economy? What surprises are waiting to be found when you understand more about energy? What stories are there in the history of science, in the many debates and discoveries concerning energy?

In any subject, people throughout history will have found themselves interested enough to discover and invent *amazing things*. The curriculum is inherently interesting. Rather than bolting on artificial sources of interest, our task is to figure out how to make this intrinsic interest apparent to our students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Colin Foster (@colinfoster77) is a Reader in Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University, and has written many books and articles for teachers; find out more at foster77.co.uk

IN THE KNOW

Martha Evans, director of the Anti-Bullying Alliance, shares her advice on how schools can improve their ability to identify instances of bullying and encourage students to come forward

What are some of the main ways in which schools can improve their capacity to monitor bullying behaviours, without resorting to surveillance measures?
The first thing that helps create monitoring capacity in schools is to have a shared understanding of what bullying is, and what it isn't.

Falling out is an important part of every child's learning and development, which we have to let them navigate. In some school communities, however, there may be individuals – or even staff – with very different conceptions of what does and doesn't constitute bullying. If you haven't spent time considering what your sense of bullying is, and agreeing on shared meanings together, you'll soon find that a lot of time will be taken up with helping young people to navigate conflict.

Your bullying policy should be as robust as possible, clearly outlining your agreed upon whole school definition of bullying, how it should be reported, what the subsequent processes will involve and so on. There also ought to be anti-bullying training in place for staff, as we still lack any form of mandatory anti-bullying training for teachers, despite the issue affecting one in four children. This could form part of an INSET day or your induction process – just so that staff are clear as to your school's principles on managing bullying and how to respond to it.

When establishing that shared definition of what bullying is, how should schools communicate it to their communities and reinforce it over time?
We use an internationally agreed definition of bullying at the Anti-Bullying Alliance which encompasses four elements – **repetition**, **power imbalance**, **hurt** and **intent**. Posters on walls; enshrining your bullying-related principles and definitions in school policy; ensuring parents know what those are – these can all help the process of weaving a respectful culture throughout the life of your school.

> **"Young people can be very smart and adept at hiding their behaviours"**

Staff should model the behaviour that the school community wants to see in each other, and explore how to go about doing that with students. When we don't like another person, what's the best way of dealing with that? How should we seek to manage conflict? These kinds of considerations can prevent things from getting out of control later on.

We'd recommend keeping a record of every bullying report you receive, and whether those reports were deemed instances of bullying or not, as that will indicate the degree to which students at your school have developed a sufficient understanding of your shared bullying definitions and principles.

How can school staff overcome the psychological barriers that can prevent victims from coming forward?
Many schools struggle with this. We've found that the most ineffective schools in this area will simply state that they '*Don't have any reported bullying*' – but then you speak to the pupils, and they'll say that they don't bother reporting it, since nothing ever happens when they do.

If you're seeing what appear to be unusually low levels of reporting, find out why that is. A key reason we hear from young people for not reporting bullying is a fear of retaliation, which is why staff responding with some variant of '*We're going to sort it out, it'll be fine, don't worry about it,*' isn't all that helpful. The young person has no idea what will happen next – in particular, whether the peer they're reporting will know who made the complaint.

What can help is to have conversations where the adult effectively says, "*I'm not going to do anything without you – we're going to work this out together.*" Young people can feel quite embarrassed when talking about bullying incidents, and potentially distrust the responses of adults around them, thus making it vital to involve them as much as possible when they do come and report to you.

Another obstacle to active reporting can be a culture in which students accuse each other of 'being snitches'. What can help here is to recognise that bullying is almost always a group behaviour – it's relatively rare for just one 'good

individual' and one 'bad individual' to be involved.

There are multiple roles involved in bullying, which people can contribute to without even realising. When you talk to students about being influenced by people laughing and egging on the perpetrators, those students accused of bullying will tend to take those accusations less personally. (e.g. "*Are you telling me I'm a terrible person?*"). This way, perpetrators' behaviour can be reframed as more a product of group behaviour that they can then work on with their teachers.

That said, we fully support being clear with young people over what's defined as 'unacceptable behaviour', and certainly wouldn't oppose any punishments for such behaviours. We would simply call for a better understanding of the group dynamics typically at play in bullying behaviours.

Are there any 'tells' that can betray bullies and the acts they've perpetrated?

Young people can be very smart and adept at hiding their behaviours. Some cases of bullying are so covert that it might outwardly appear that the young people involved are good friends, when they're not. Sometimes, the individual being bullied may not want to lose that 'friendship' by reporting what's happening – despite it being a friendship that may have started well, but then tipped into something very different over time.

It can also help to look for repetition. Your reporting system can help you here – if you see that someone reported being bullied a week ago, and it was concluded that the case didn't amount to bullying, then a further case involving the same students should raise a red flag and be recorded.

Victims of bullying often won't look 'sad' to outside observers, as they'll want to conceal how much bullying has affected them, while avoiding being a target for anyone else. What can then happen is that some students will act out – perhaps by being horrible to their siblings at home, or misbehaving in school to try and escape the situation they're in. They may well go on to bully other students.

How can schools encourage a default response of mutual vigilance and resistance to bullying among their students as a whole?

Maintaining a respectful culture and ethos that's modelled and agreed among your cohort is vital. As children enter Y7, there has to be clarity in terms of they how they'll be expected to treat each other and the behaviour standards they must agree to. This could even take the form of a written contract they have to physically 'sign'.

At the same time, schools should concede that students aren't always going to get on. There *will* be things that they wind each other up about – but ultimately, how do they want to be treating each other? Reiterate and model your culture and associated behaviours as often as possible, so that students see them wherever they go.

That said, it's relatively rare for a child to be severely bullied without them attempting to do or say something to their bullies in retaliation – perhaps via some form of action that they won't want to share with you, the adult.

In those instances, the school needs to make clear that staff will be understanding of such behaviours. There can be very punitive cultures in some schools, which may be needed at times – but they can also go too far, and discourage students from being honest. Students ought to be aware that there's an attitude of '*We're going to work it out together*' that will support them, rather than the prospect of a detention for having sworn at a classmate.

Finally, it's vital to nip any derogatory and discriminatory language in the bud – even if it's not being specifically used to bully. By failing to act on instances of, say, disablist or homophobic language, you risk creating a culture in which that language becomes acceptable, causing some groups to feel isolated.

Anti-Bullying Week 2025, organised by the Anti-Bullying Alliance, takes place from 10th to 14th November and will be themed around 'Power for Good'; for more information, visit anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

WHAT MAKES A GOOD REPORTING SYSTEM?

- "No secondary school should still be using a paper-based reporting system, though we've seen how that unfortunately does still happen. The solution you use needn't be an expensive one, but it's vital that it be computerised.
- "Your reporting system isn't just there to record incidents. It should also be a reflection of how well your anti-bullying strategy is working.
- One feature of good reporting systems that often gets missed is having a field for student characteristics – gender, age and so forth. We know, for instance, that students in receipt of free school meals, or who have SEND, are more at risk of bullying. Is that data being recorded, and can your recording system alert you to high incidences of a particular type of bullying?
- Your recording should be able to trigger safeguarding responses based on the locations where bullying is taking place. Bullying is more common during transition points on the way to and from school, for example. Are you recording whether bullying is occurring on buses transporting your students? If so, are you then feeding that data back into your wider anti-bullying strategy?

Why trauma-informed practice matters

We find out how the online learning facilities and teaching expertise provided by **Academy21** can help support students experiencing symptoms of trauma

Recent reports on young people's mental health and attendance underscore the continued disconnection many students feel with education. Indeed, NHS findings indicate that 20.3% of 8- to 16-year-olds have a probable mental health difficulty – a figure that's noticeably increased over recent years.

While not all student challenges stem from trauma, it's clear that difficult life events have significantly hindered many students' ability to thrive, often without the support needed to process them.

Managing unpredictability

The DfE defines trauma as significantly distressing circumstances that can have, '*Lasting adverse effects, limiting the ability to function and achieve mental, physical, social and emotional well-being.*" This might include isolated incidents, such as bereavement, or longer-term trauma, such as abuse or being a witness to domestic violence in the home.

For young people, this is often more profound because their ability to process is limited by experience and their development. Research institutions, government bodies and charities continue to examine the influence of trauma on young people's outcomes, and while there are different views on its application, there is recognition that trauma-informed practice matters.

At Academy21, we serve students who have experienced profoundly

adverse events and a disconnection from positive relationships, which makes the unpredictability of school life harder to manage.

What our practice looks like

We work with pupils who face significant challenges in traditional schooling, for whom prior trauma is often a central issue. Our staff are trained to recognise signs of trauma and respond with empathy and consistency, whilst maintaining high ambitions.

A key benefit of online settings is that they enable students to connect with teachers in a flexible, controlled environment where pressures are easier to manage through technology. We meet students where they are, and take slow steps towards building their sense of safety and confidence. This helps the adolescent brain relearn safety, and starts to rewire the neuronal pathways that support a lasting move away from 'fight, flight, or freeze'.

This is a priority area; being trauma-informed is not an 'end state', but rather a constant pursuit. There are, however, some areas we have deliberately targeted in order to improve the experience for our students.

Certainty and security

We maintain systems and an ethos that help students flag when they're struggling, as seen in many excellent physical schools – where clear procedures and confident staff will ensure calm, consistent responses.

Online, we can also create spaces in which young people are able to regulate and share, whether through one-to-one chat pods with teachers or with dedicated support staff, whose availability is enhanced by our setting.

Some of our practical strategies are simple, such as utilising flexible timetables to ensure students have the same class teacher in each subject at the same time of day. Other approaches can be more intricate – such as our organisation-wide relational teaching training, which is rooted in the developmental factors that influence learning.

We equip teachers with strategies that enhance our relational approach through technology, which has in part led to 97% of our students feeling encouraged to participate in their lessons.

Choice and empowerment

We build on an environment of safety, by providing students with opportunities to influence their pathway with Academy21. The excellent work of partner schools informs some of our approaches, including regular student voice surveys, a student council and varied participation tools.

Others are more involved, and aimed at making active listening a fundamental part of our approach by attuning to cues, validating student feelings and making adjustments to programmes.

This year, we've run a series of regular peer-to-peer developmental discussions following group inputs, providing staff with the space to explore positive psychology, and examine scenarios where they can build relationships with hard-to-reach students.

At the heart of our efforts to be trauma-informed is the recognition that 'difference is our default'. We prepare our staff and systems for students arriving with individualised ambitions and past experiences. This mindset is the starting point for giving support to those who need it most.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Alessandro Capozzi is Executive Headteacher at Academy21; for more information, visit academy21.co.uk

THE TS GUIDE TO... LITERACY

How one school sought to implement a lasting and effective reading strategy; the important lessons that 'spoof media' can teach students about disinformation; and how learning the terminology of different subjects can be more enjoyable than you might think...

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IN FIGURES:

WHAT PROPORTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE ENJOY READING AND WHY?

18.7%
of UK children and young people aged 8 to 18 say that they read something daily in their free time

51.8%
of those 8- to 18-year-olds who read say they do so to learn new words; 42.1% read to improve their focus, while 34.4% read to understand different views

38.1%
of all 8- to 18-year-olds who enjoy reading 'a bit' or not at all' are motivated to read by material related to a film/TV show they enjoy; 13.4% of this group were motivated by social media and 'book influencers'

Source: 'Children and young people's reading in 2025' report produced by The National Literacy Trust

3 TEACHWIRE ARTICLES FROM THE ARCHIVES

LITERACY FOR SEND STUDENTS IS A WHOLE-SCHOOL CHALLENGE
Literacy affects everything – so make sure that your strategies always involve everyone, writes Nancy Gedge
tiny.cc/145special1

READING, WRITING... REGISTRATION?
Meera Chudasama presents some useful KS3/4 literacy activities that are ideally suited to form time
tiny.cc/145special2

REALITY CHECK
Students need to know how to read for purpose as well as pleasure, says Catharine Driver
tiny.cc/145special3

Scaling new heights

Andrea Miller sets out the five steps that Wey Valley Academy in Weymouth followed when seeking to embed an effective reading strategy

During a February 2025 speech delivered at the Centre for Social Justice, Bridget Philipson announced a £1 million pound scheme to support secondary schools with their reading offer. The content of her speech largely echoed what most teachers already know – that "*Reading and writing are the cornerstones of learning. They hold the keys to the rest of the curriculum, with pupils who struggle to read so often struggling across the board.*" (see tiny.cc/ts145-RS1)

I'm lucky enough to be in my third year of leading on reading, at a school that's in its sixth year of embedding reading at the heart of what we do. Last year's Y11s were our first cohort to sit their GCSEs having experienced our reading strategy throughout their secondary education. Their results? The best in the school's history, making us the most improved school county-wide.

We are now in the enviable position of fine-tuning our reading strategy; building on and refining what we've found works, while discarding what doesn't. Our key learning can now be summed up under five distinct headings.

1. SLT must lead the way

Ideally, the school's headteacher will introduce the reading strategy to staff and offer a clear vision of why it matters. A successful reading strategy needs all staff to come fully on board, which can't happen without highly visible leadership from both the headteacher and wider SLT.

2. Be prepared to commit adequate resources

We're sometimes visited by staff from other schools who have been tasked with leading a reading strategy themselves, but without having been given adequate resources in terms of both money and time.

They lack the cash needed to buy books, arrange intervention programmes and carry out testing. Nor can they call upon the whole school time necessary for delivering additional reading. A whole school approach to reading can only work successfully if enough cash and time is made available.

> **"The school day was extended to enable 30 minutes of sacrosanct daily reading time"**

For us, the school day was extended to enable 30 minutes of sacrosanct daily reading time as part of a Drop Everything And Read (DEAR) programme. We have enough reading books for every child to have a copy in their hands, and enough money to fund online literacy intervention subscriptions for those students needing extra support.

Setting aside 30 minutes of daily literacy time allows us to offer a range of reading catch-up programmes, without any student having to miss out on curriculum time, or being expected to give up their free time at lunch or after school. It also means we're able to stretch all of our students.

DEAR time isn't just about helping those who have fallen behind to catch up, but also about providing opportunities to *all* students to extend their reading skills. If you've been an English teacher for as long as I have, then you'll know that parents bemoaning the reluctance of their teenage child to read at home isn't as new a phenomenon as recent headlines might suggest. Making reading a compulsory part of the school day overcomes this, and serves to remind many students (and some teachers!) that reading can actually be – whisper it – *rather enjoyable*…

3. Track the data

We test students' reading ages termly, and use a spreadsheet to track this data across time. This gives us a holistic picture, meaning that the student whose reading age bombed because they were feeling unwell isn't targeted for intervention. Instead, we can see at a glance that their latest reading age is just a blip.

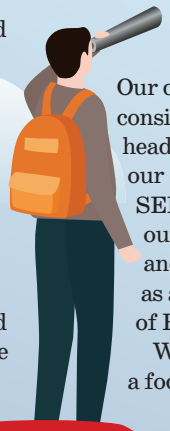
Tracking the data in this way also means that we can target students whose reading has reached a plateau, and examine the progress of specific cohorts over time – especially those students eligible for Pupil Premium, with SEND and who have English as an additional language.

4. Share the data

I've yet to meet the student who doesn't want to know their calculated reading age as soon as possible after taking a test.

At first, we tried to soften the blow for those found to have a poor reading age – but we've since learned that those students already know that they struggle with reading, and would actually appreciate some honesty, alongside a plan for supporting them.

We will regularly share micro data with students in literacy intervention programmes, letting them know their 'numbers' with respect to reading speed, increased vocabulary and/or comprehension. The latest set of reading ages will go home on reports, and all staff have access to the master reading spreadsheet, giving them a detailed picture across time for every student.



5. Keep learning

Our core literacy team consists of the deputy head, a vice principal, our SENCo and deputy SENCo, our outstanding librarian and myself, in my role as a lead practitioner of English.

We meet termly, with a focus on solving problems. Last year,

for example, we noticed how, despite some fantastic reading data headline figures following our introduction of Sparx Reader homework, the gap between the reading ages of PP and non-PP students had actually widened. We decided to trial twice-weekly opportunities to complete Sparx Reader homework during tutor time for 20 Y10 PP students, who had been struggling to engage with reading at home.

The trial proved so successful that we opted to extend this to 60 further students in Y7-9. The new intervention has since provided many of our PP students with an additional hour of weekly literacy support (on top of DEAR) which, in many cases, has been enough to see them catch up or even exceed the reading age of their non-Pupil Premium peers.

We maintain a further feedback channel via our DEAR student committee, which meets termly. This provides students with a genuine opportunity to communicate which books are working for their tutor groups and which aren't, which in turn informs our restocking choices.

When the budget allows for the purchase of new titles, we will give our DEAR committee the opportunity to suggest books and have the final say on purchases. Inspired by Spotify Wrapped, we then distribute end-of-year feedback regarding those books that have been most enjoyed, and which tutor groups have read the most titles. We'll also take this opportunity to issue some clear '*You said, we did*' feedback in relation to actions we've taken over the past year to address DEAR issues raised by our students either formally through the committee, or informally via their tutors and individually-submitted feedback.

Value for money

While it might not be possible to implement these strategies on the cheap, when looked at as a percentage of the whole school budget, our literacy work has delivered real value for money – not just in terms of exam results, but also in building student self-esteem and wellbeing.

Every time a student in a reading support intervention moves their reading age up to 'age expected', we'll conduct a brief 'exit interview' before releasing them back to standard DEAR time with their tutor. During this interview, we'll ask if they have noticed any improvement in their learning across the school since they've been in reading support. The usual response tends to involve a raised eyebrow, followed by a quiet, yet emphatic '*YES!*'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Andrea Miller is lead practitioner of English at Wey Valley Academy in Weymouth, part of the Authentic Education trust; for more information, visit weareauthentic.education

WHAT MAKES A GOOD 'DEAR' BOOK?

Under our DEAR programme, students will typically read seven books annually. The questions we typically ask before ordering a new set of books include:

- Will this book be accessible to all students in the room?
- Is this book likely to engage our students?
- Does this book fit into our overall DEAR map to build a rounded picture of the world, with titles that reflect our students' lives and culture, alongside titles that encourage them to look beyond their own community and experiences?
- Does this book encourage students to reflect on British Values?
- Does this book encourage students to empathise with, and build respect for others – including those with protected characteristics?
- Has this book been approved by our student DEAR committee?

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- Curated topical collections with resources to support teaching around moments such as **Holocaust Memorial Day** and **Women's History Month.**
- Classroom projects from the BBC including **Ten Pieces** which opens up the world of classical music for 7-14 year-olds.

To find out more search BBC Bitesize and click on the Teachers tab.

REASONS TO TRY...

5 Access Reading and Mathematics Tests

Assessments to support maths and reading in your school

30 SECOND BRIEFING

Access Reading Tests (ART) and Access Mathematics Tests (AMT) are standardised skill-based assessments, designed to measure understanding and track progress of learners as they move from Y7 to Y9

hachette LEARNING

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1 BENCHMARK LEARNERS

Use Access Reading and Mathematics Tests at the very start of the school year (or when new learners join you) to get a clear picture of your learners' strengths and areas for improvement. Standardised against a representative sample of more than 15,000 test submissions, these assessments provide reliable benchmarks to measure your learners against peers in their age group. Analyse gaps at strand and question level, and build a comprehensive profile of each learner's ability, supporting teachers in determining where a learner sits in their cohort and setting appropriate targets.

2 TRACK AND PREDICT PROGRESS

ART and AMT are comprised of three pairs of parallel forms, to be taken at the start and end of a year, or a teaching/intervention period to measure impact and evidence progress. Among the outcomes generated in assessment reports, the Hodder Scale score is an independent, decimal scale designed to monitor and predict progress. Directly comparable between all tests in the series, this enables teachers to track small increments of progress across tests. Predicted Hodder Scale scores show how learners could expect perform in a year's time, if they stay at the same percentile of performance within their cohort.

3 DETAILED REPORTING

Instant reporting in Boost Insights (our complementary assessment platform) allows you to generate a range of reports, including strand and question-level analysis, progress reports, group reports, test comparisons and more. These insights empower teachers and school leaders to make informed, data-driven decisions on where to invest teaching time and allocate resources, allowing you to support learners where they need it most. They are also great tools for facilitating conversations with parents and other stakeholders!

4 EASY AND EFFICIENT

Available as print papers and digital assessments, choose the format that works for you. Digital assessments are auto-marked upon submission, and marksheets for print papers support bulk uploading in Boost Insights, allowing you to get straight to the analysis and cut the time spent on admin. Tests should take 30-45 minutes to complete, offering valuable learner insights within the timespan of a single lesson.

5 UNLOCK INTERVENTIONS

Take the next step and effectively address learning gaps with Shine Interventions: ART and AMT. Shine interventions work by identifying learners with qualifying gaps in knowledge (based on their ART or AMT results) and providing direct links to engaging, downloadable intervention activities, targeting the identified area of learning.

Teacher presentations, worksheets, videos and progress quizzes provide all the resources needed to run effective interventions and ensure successful delivery, regardless of subject knowledge. Find out more, book a free demo or start your trial at hachettelearning.com/shine.

Key Points

Access Reading and Mathematics Tests cost £2.40 per learner, available for purchase as print test packs or online test credits – find out more at hachettelearning.com/assessment.

ART and AMT results drive free and instant reporting in Boost Insights. View a full breakdown of analyses and available reports at hachettelearning.com/insights.

Accurate standardised scores and attainment ages make it easy to benchmark individual learners and track progress over multiple tests.

Shine Interventions: ART and AMT offer diagnostically-driven intervention resources, exclusive with these assessments. Unlock these from £410 for an annual subscription, covering your whole school.

Fact or fiction?

Andrew K. Shenton considers the educational value of artfully constructed hoaxes when it comes to teaching students media and information literacy skills...

Given the prevalence of 'fake news', misinformation and disinformation, few independent learning skills are more important today than the ability to make evaluative judgements on the sources we access.

Teachers can encourage students to hone their critical faculties by inviting them to determine the credibility of hoaxes, such as television productions like the 1977 ITV mockumentary *Alternative 3*, the BBC's 1992 'live broadcast' drama *Ghostwatch* and Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*.

Tell-tale signs

For a more recent example, we can look to *Fantasy Park: Fifty Years On* – a mock-documentary first transmitted on BBC Radio Four in March 2025, and still available at the time of writing via BBC Sounds (see tiny.cc/ts145-ML1). Described by the *Radio Times* as a "*Fake 48-hour music festival... created for radio broadcast from pre-existing recordings*" *Fantasy Park* mischievously presents this fictitious event retrospectively as one that actually took place.

When playing the mock radio documentary to students, we can ask them to identify any elements that seem suspicious. The sceptical adult may be wary due to multiple factors, starting with the name. After all, one definition of 'fantasy' is something with no basis in reality.

Then there's the potential significance of Jon Holmes' involvement as co-writer, producer and director, who is well known for his work on *The Skewer* – a satirical Radio Four show that edits together existing sound clips for humorous effect. The programme is also (purposefully) vague on basic facts, such as when and where the concert took place. It's merely stated to have happened in 'July 1975' at a venue 'just a few short miles south of Cincinnati'.

Furthermore, *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling is named as one of the announcers in the original radio coverage. At one point, he refers to what listeners will hear "*In the coming hours and days*" but Serling couldn't have been presenting 'live' at the time of the event, since he'd died the previous month.

An adult audience would also struggle to believe that so many marquee pop acts of the 1970s could have been assembled for a single festival, unless it were in aid of charity. Yet no details are given regarding how the performers were attracted and paid. We're even told that The Beatles appeared at the festival – despite it being common knowledge that they never reformed with all four members following their split in 1970.

Key considerations

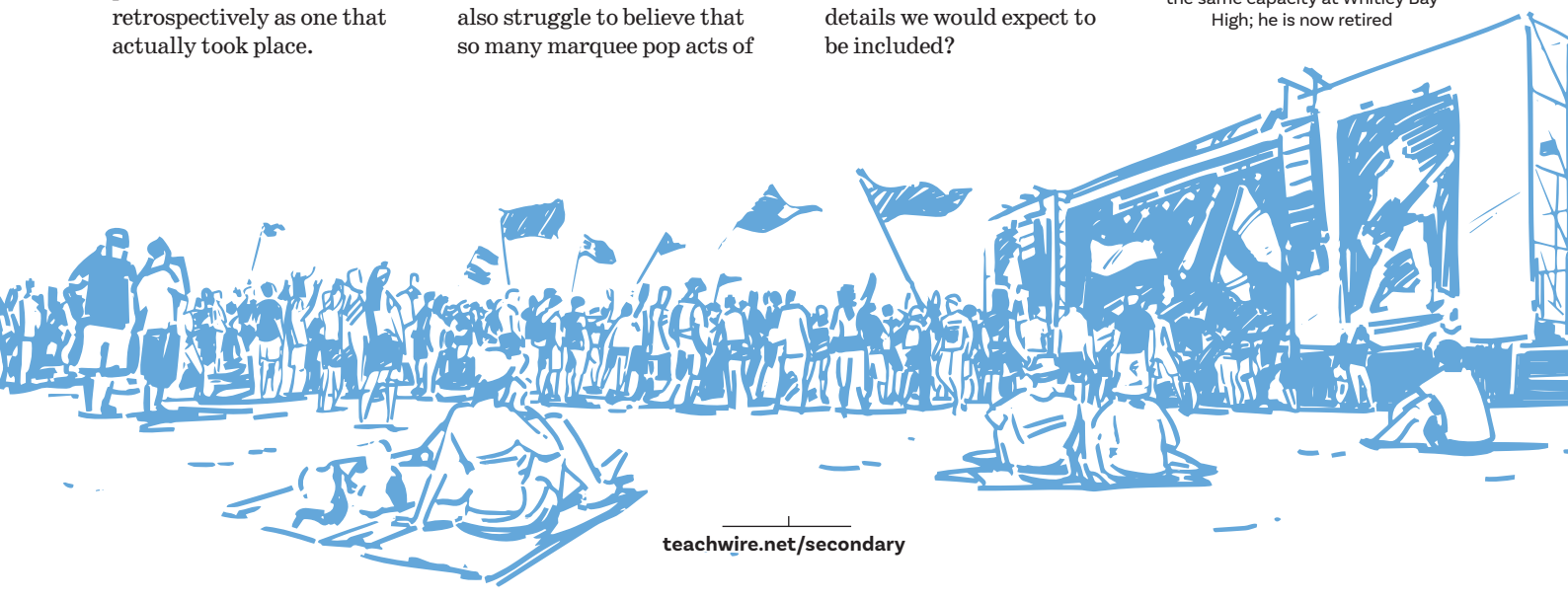
As students make their own observations while listening to *Fantasy Park: Fifty Years On*, we can encourage them to move from specific concerns to more general underlying issues before then formulating questions they should perhaps consider when engaging with other information sources in future. These questions could include:

- Are there any clues that the material isn't to be taken seriously?
- Can the overall narrative, and the elements within it, be considered credible?
- To what extent is the information stated compatible with your existing knowledge and facts obtained from elsewhere?
- Does the source omit any details we would expect to be included?
- Are those responsible for the item known for a particular type of work – and would the source in question fit the creator's prevailing pattern?

A classroom activity of the sort presented here can, of course, be centred on a media text or information source of any kind, though students may find it easier – at least initially – to work with a radio broadcast rather than a film or TV show, as they need only concentrate on what they hearing. Once they've considered the source, ask them to justify their judgements by citing the available evidence.

Regardless of the material you use, this exercise may help students hone a set of questions and responses they can then apply to similar such assignments in future, as well as their independent learning and research more generally.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dr. Andrew K. Shenton worked for many years as an EPQ teacher at Monkseaton High School and then in the same capacity at Whitley Bay High; he is now retired



Winning words

Students can often struggle with subject-specific vocabulary, writes **Meera Chudasama** – which is why it's worth trying to inject a little fun into the process...

More often than not, we'll ask students to guess the meaning of a word, or generate words for a particular idea. This often takes up a lot of time, and disadvantages those students who don't come from word-rich backgrounds.

So why not give students words in smaller, bite-size chunks and then provide them with opportunities to use those new words while experimenting with other words in your subject area? Here, I want to outline a few literacy strategies that can support students in the classrooms of some very different lessons.

Before tackling a new concept or topic, consider the differing degrees of literacy your students are going to have, and think about how you can tackle the fears and difficulties some may experience when learning tricky words. The games and activities outlined below can all help students become familiar with new, subject-specific vocabulary in an engaging way, and discover how they can use said vocabulary in their work.

Literacy starters

The first 10 minutes of a lesson provide a great opportunity to revise prior learning, highlight any misconceptions and introduce any new terminology you want your students to learn.

One way of ensuring more needs are met is to use a starter selection of four short literacy activities that students can choose from. These activities can change and alternate across the topics you'll be teaching throughout the academic year. An example of what this might look like for a geography lesson can be seen in fig 1.

The activities in the grid are designed to test students' prior knowledge, understand new terms and help them become more critically engaged with the wider world. The keyword task will support students in developing their writing with new words, or terms that are especially tricky. The anagrams, on the other hand, will be useful practice for students who might be struggling to remember and recall words they should already be familiar with.

> **"We've used games to build resilience, boost confidence and create a community built around sharing words"**

The aim of the 'In the news' activity is to get students making links between the course and the wider world to develop their skills of interpretation, while the 'Quiz it!' activity serves as a tool for gauging what students have retained and understood from previous topics.

Reading aloud and audiobooks

Whilst it may be great to hear students reading aloud, don't forget how beneficial it can be for students to also hear their teacher reading. As well as learning the correct pronunciation of words, they'll be able to interpret meanings more accurately and likely gain a better understanding of the text itself.

Dedicating a good proportion of your week's lesson to reading a new text aloud will enable students to understand more difficult words in context. Consider using written texts from a range of different sources – be it a news article, blogpost or book extract. Exposing students to a variety of texts will be particularly helpful for those lacking access to a breadth of literature at home.

You could even try listening to an audiobook together, playing and pausing the audio at key moments to let students extract important information, explore their own interpretations of what they're

fig 1

KEYWORD

Superpower, when used in a geographical context, typically refers to a country able to wield considerable influence and dominance over other nations.

Use this word in a sentence, and then in a paragraph, giving examples of BRIC nations that are developing into superpowers.

IN THE NEWS

'Will MINT nations supersede BRIC nations?'

Write the opening paragraph to this headline, including key terms from previous lessons.

ANAGRAMS

- adtre
- upsrewoerp
- limtrayi
- woper

QUIZ IT!

Write a 10-question quiz about the features of a superpower nation.

hearing and further develop their thoughts on the ideas, characters and events being conveyed. See fig. 2 for a list of questions you could utilise when reading (or indeed listening) to fiction versus non-fiction texts.

Fiction	Non-Fiction
• Who is the main character? • What has happened so far? • Who do you think will....? • How did you feel when...? • What do you think will happen next?	• What does the opening reveal to the reader? • What do you expect will happen when...? • What do you think motivated [X] to do [Y]? • When did...?

fig 2

Reciprocal teaching

Reciprocal teaching is a wonderful way for students to showcase what they've learnt and understood – be that a particular historical event, a new formula, or an application of a theoretical approach to the wider world. So how can we make reciprocal teaching effective?

1. Give students the autonomy to deliver a 10- to 15-minute presentation from a list of topics you've prepared in advance.
2. Present the students with a clear success criteria of what needs to be achieved.
3. Encourage your presenters to draw on a range of resources in order to demonstrate what they've learnt (and perhaps even incorporate some new learning in the process).

If you've been teaching the Cold War in history, for example, and you've come to the end of a unit of work, divide the class into small groups and give them each a topic to focus on.

Possibilities in this instance might include Potsdam, the start of the Cold War, satellite states, American foreign policy or the role played by Hungary. You could then give each group a list of key terms you'd like to see them include in their presentations, as a way of measuring how successful their understanding has been.

Flipped reading

Give students key readings to study at home (perhaps by revisiting your collection of articles, blogposts and book extracts from earlier). In the readings, highlight any keywords that are particularly important for students to know, and then refer back to these during the lessons that follow.

Encourage the students to read their texts aloud with parents, carers or guardians, and perhaps couple this with sending home letters or correspondence to ensure they'll be able to provide appropriate support.

Word play

This year, I've been seeing a lot of benefit in playing literacy-based games to help our lower ability students gain confidence with using words. From Boggle to Bananagrams, we've used games to build resilience, boost word confidence and create a community built around the sharing of words with each other.

Boggle

1. Write a selection of 12 letters on the board.
2. Allow students three optional lifelines (if you want to): **a)** students get to add ONE letter of their choice; **b)** students can switch ONE letter for another; **c)** students can create a duplicate of ONE letter only.
3. Set a timer, and then award the student who can create the most words out of the final selection of letters, and the student who manages to come up with the longest word.

At the end, write the lengthiest words on the board, describe what they mean and explain how they could be used in a sentence.

Over time, you'll see students progress from smaller words to much lengthier words (though do encourage them to check their spellings).

Bananagrams (*for 2 to 4 players, full kit available from online retailers*)

1. Give each player a selection of 20 letter tiles from the 144 supplied in the kit; place the remaining tiles in the centre of the table.
2. The students then use their letters to create as many words as they can, arranging their words left to right horizontally, or top to bottom vertically. At this stage, the students can change any of their words any time.
3. As soon as a player places the last letter on their grid, they shout 'Peel!' They, and everyone else playing, then has to take another letter.
4. When the number of tiles left in the centre is fewer than the number of players, the first player to successfully use all of their letters in a connected word grid is declared the winner of that round.
5. You can play for as many or as few rounds as you wish, and potentially assign students specific keywords that they'll need to ensure appear within their Bananagrams.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Meera Chudasama is an English, media and film studies teacher

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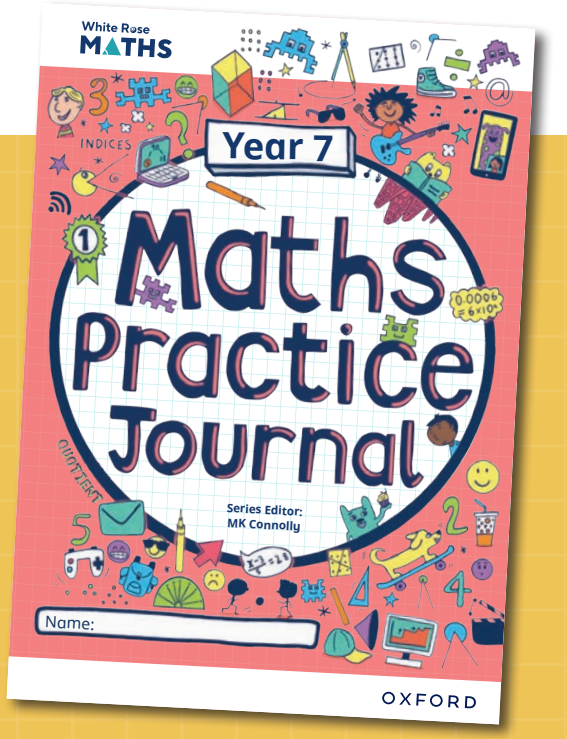

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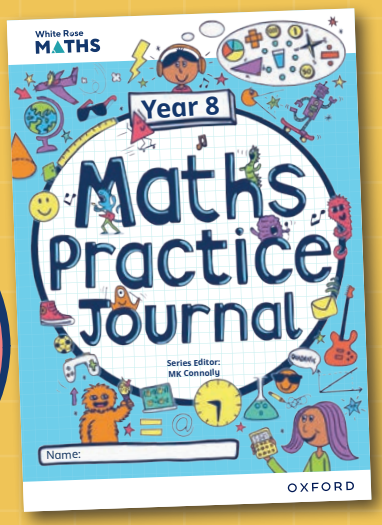

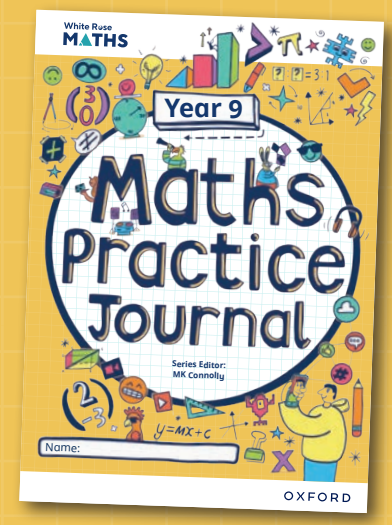

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No more 'Plan B'

No one should be dismissing T Levels and apprenticeships as a 'fallback option', says **Jade Kelly**...

For too long, T Levels and apprenticeships have been seen as 'alternatives' – pathways for students who don't quite fit the traditional academic route. But it's a narrative that's changing before our eyes.

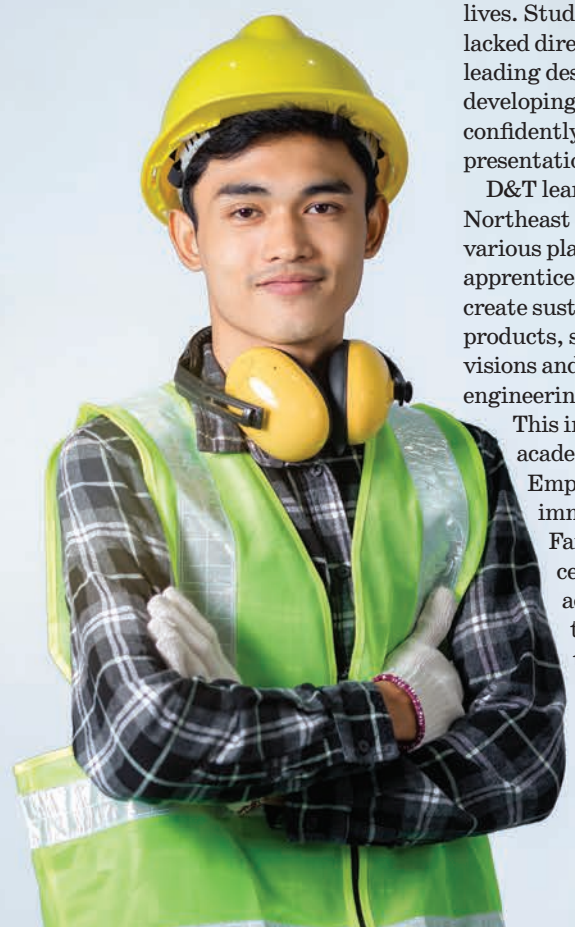
These programmes are no longer being seen as merely plan B, but are fast becoming the favoured choice for a growing number of students, educators and employers. Nowhere has this shift been more powerful than in D&T, where hands-on learning and real-world placements are unlocking futures, building confidence, and helping students seize on career opportunities they'd never previously imagined.

From traction to action

What was once a fresh idea is now a movement that's shaping the future. T Levels and apprenticeships have moved beyond trials and talk to delivering real results, and the creation of genuine opportunities for students and businesses alike.

With over 25,000 students enrolled in T Levels across England in 2023 (a number that's set to double by 2026), plus more than 12,000 apprenticeship starts in the Northeast last year, it's clear that this is no passing trend.

Colleges across Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Sunderland and beyond are not just championing these programmes, but embedding them into the very fabric of education and driving new employer partnerships that benefit everyone. In turn, employers are gaining motivated, work-ready talent. Students are able to gain life-changing experience and skills. The region is able to benefit as a whole.



Transformations you can feel

The beauty of T Levels and apprenticeships is how clearly they can transform young lives. Students who once lacked direction are now leading design projects, developing prototypes and confidently delivering presentations to clients.

D&T learners in the Northeast are thriving in various placements and apprenticeships, helping to create sustainable 3D printing products, shape architectural visions and develop engineering solutions.

This impact isn't just academic – it's personal. Employers are seeing an immediate difference. Families are celebrating students' achievements, and the students themselves are building careers where they feel they belong.

A seamless pathway

One particularly powerful aspect of T Levels is how they can act as a stepping stone into apprenticeships, and create a smooth transition from education to full-time employment. Many employers are using T Level placements on a 'try before you buy' basis, allowing them to evaluate students' skills, work ethic and cultural fit before offering them apprenticeships or permanent roles. As well as reducing recruitment risks and cutting training costs, the process lets businesses invest in talent they've already nurtured.

Apprenticeships can then deepen these relationships further, providing structured on-the-job learning with ongoing academic support, thus turning capable T Level students into highly skilled professionals aligned to a company's specific needs.

Beyond engineering

D&T skills can also open doors far beyond traditional engineering. From sustainable tech and architecture, to digital media and the creative industries, the possibilities on offer are vast.

The Northeast, with its rich industrial heritage and rapidly expanding clean energy, advanced manufacturing and digital technology sectors, is already perfectly placed to offer an exciting range of careers.

The next few years are set to see explosive growth, with new T Level subjects launching in healthcare, media and legal services. There are also signs of increased engagement from more local businesses – notably SMEs – accompanied by expanded access routes for rural and under-represented students, as well as increased investment in facilities and staff training.

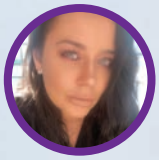
By 2030, T Levels and apprenticeships will form the backbone of the country's technical education, with the Northeast leading the charge. We can expect tomorrow's brightest engineers, designers and innovators to have come up through hands-on, industry-connected routes like T Levels and apprenticeships. Businesses that engage now will likely gain a competitive advantage, having nurtured a skilled workforce deeply attuned to their needs.

Schools' message for businesses should be that offering placements and apprenticeships amounts to more than mere CSR; it's a valuable investment their company's future, and an effective means of actively shaping their workforce for decades to come.

A TEESSIDE SUCCESS STORY

BC&T Consultants in Stockton has embraced the 'T Level to apprenticeship' pathway wholeheartedly. As Joe Melville, the company's engineering manager, explains, "*We wanted to grow our own future engineers and saw T Levels as the perfect stepping stone. Students like Jack, who complete their T Level placements, are offered apprenticeships with us.*"

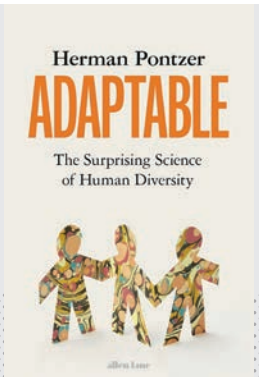
Jack made an immediate impact. As Joe recalls, "*Right from the start, Jack supported live projects with design and engineering input. His work ethic and skill have even led him to apply for professional registration with the Institute of Engineering and Technology and attain EngTech [Engineering Technician] status – a huge achievement.*"

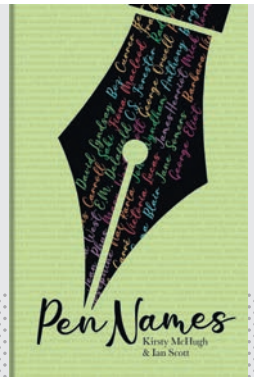


ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Jade Kelly is a work placement coordinator at Middlesbrough College TTE

Off the Shelves

Brilliant titles for you and your students to explore





Adaptable: The Surprising Science of Human Diversity

(Herman Pontzer, Allen Lane, £25)

You could be forgiven for thinking a book by an evolutionary anthropologist would hold little relevance for most people. As the title suggests, the subject under discussion here is how human physiology has developed in different ways, in response to different conditions around the world – and yet it's a highly informative read, centring on how our bodies work, and causes of, and solutions to modern maladies such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Indeed, it's the most readable (and comprehensible) book about human biology I've ever read. In one chapter, for example, Pontzer describes in step-by-step detail what happens to a cheeseburger from the moment it enters your mouth to the subsequent waste disposal. Packed as it is with similar such explanations and revelations, with a soupçon of light humour thrown in, it comes highly recommended.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

(see ***bit.ly/Eclecticism*** for more details)

The Library of Ancient Wisdom: Mesopotamia and the Making of History

(Selena Wisnom, Allen Lane, £30)

A fascinating account of the daily lives lived by people thousands of years ago. How do we know such details? The library housing their accumulated wisdom was set on fire, but the 'books' in said library were clay tablets. The fire's heat hardened those tablets into ceramic, thereby ensuring their preservation for millennia. Thus, we learn how writing was first invented, and the eerie similarities between some stories of the time and those recorded (much later) in The Bible. Some achievements seem remarkable, such as the discovery of Pythagoras' theorem a thousand years before Pythagoras was born. Other practices seem utterly alien to modern eyes – divination using a sheep's entrails, anyone? We also hear about the work being done to preserve ceramic microfilm for tomorrow's historians.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

Pen Names

(Kirsty McHugh & Ian Scott, Bodleian, £14.99)

All life is contained within these pages – because who could have guessed that behind the innocent-seeming name on many a book cover lie all manner of secrets? The case of the Brontës is well-known – male-sounding writers' names generally making more sense in an age when novel-writing wasn't seen as being respectable, thus shining a light on important aspects of social and economic history at the time. But a pen name was also used in at least one case when an author wanted to hide his royalties from his estranged wife. Many other pen names have been adopted for marketing purposes – such as those times when an author wishes to branch out into a completely different genre. And were you aware that well-known author Nicci French is, in fact, two people? A slim, yet enjoyable volume, it's a treasure trove of unexpected insights into the storied history of the publishing industry.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

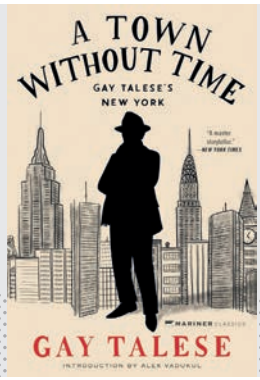
ON THE RADAR

Because of You, This is Me
(Jaz Ampaw-Farr, Independent Thinking Press, £16.99)

If Jaz Ampaw-Farr is a familiar name to you, it will likely be due to her popular and widely-shared motivational talks themed around resilience, leadership and wellbeing. Prior to her speaking career, she was a literacy adviser and a primary school teacher, as well as a one-time candidate for the UK version of *The Apprentice*. And before that, she was the survivor of a childhood characterised by serial neglect and abuse.

Part memoir, part instructional guide for the country's teachers, this book recounts how Ampaw-Farr was able to withstand, and eventually escape an early upbringing that was, based on the accounts presented here, genuinely harrowing. Be advised that the details make for an extremely difficult read in places.

The book's other aim is immediately apparent from how it's structured. The five main chapters are all named after a different teacher from Ampaw-Farr's own schooldays, each serving as a character study and detailed breakdown of all the things that teacher said and did to assist the youthful Ampaw-Farr in ways large and small – from Mrs Cook, who treated her professed ambitions to be a teacher with encouraging respect, to Mr Williams, who helped refer her and her younger brother to Social Services. Taken as a whole, this book illustrates the profound, life-altering impact that teachers can have on their students' lives more powerfully than any set of statistics ever could.



A Town Without Time: Gay Talese's New York
(Gay Talese, Mariner Classics, £20)

Anyone wanting to show their students how to write compelling prose could do far worse than introduce them to Gay Talese, and the keen eye for detail and ear for dialogue that makes his essays such a masterclass in observation. As a practitioner of what was once heralded as 'The New Journalism', his work vividly shows how factual accounts can be rendered in prose so lively and vibrant that that it almost feels like you're reading a novel. As well as his acclaimed essay on Frank Sinatra, other subjects tackled in this collection include the cats of New York, a homeless woman with two homes, and the obituary writer keenly waiting for his subjects to drop dead so that he can at last see his work in print. Some of these stories are so richly told, it can almost seem as though you're right there with him. A must for English students.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

The Dark That Hides Us
(Andy Darcy Theo, £9.99, Simon & Schuster)

At first glance, Andy Darcy Theo's 'Descent into Darkness' series resembles as a YA fantasy 'greatest hits', with its quest narrative centring on several teen 'Chosen Ones' battling the machinations of a sinister antagonist. In the first volume, *The Light That Blinds Us*, a school trip to Stonehenge brought together our heroes Alexis, Demi, Blaise and Caeli, who discovered they were the inheritors of a mythical society, The Elementals, with mastery of unique powers derived from earth, wind, water and fire. This suitably darker follow-up sees the group hunkered down, preparing to take on the evil Mortem and his plans to shroud the world in perpetual darkness – while also confronting some home truths about themselves and each other. For all the intricate world-building, the prose positively zips along, aided by snappy repartee and romantic intrigue between the four richly drawn leads. Those wanting a big, bold YA saga to sink their teeth into will find much to enjoy here.

Meet the author

ANDY DARCY THEO

You began writing the 'Descent into Darkness' series when you were 13 – how hard was it to develop the story over all that time?

I wrote the first three books back-to-back when I was 13, so was very much 'on it' – but then I stopped to do my GCSE exams, A Levels and university course, so there was a five-year break when I didn't write anything.

When COVID happened, I was working two-part time jobs – one at a psychiatric hospital, and another as a private clinical psychology assistant, having studied for a psychology degree. I realised then that my passion for psychology and old love of fantasy could intertwine, and with the world essentially 'on pause', I had enough time at home to focus on writing.

Did working with that material by your younger self take some discipline?

Rewriting the first volume I'd written all those years ago was a labour of love. I knew I already had a good foundation there, but also knew I couldn't be afraid of making changes to the original draft.

Were you getting much feedback while the story was gestating?

For a good seven to eight years, it was pretty much just me, but after I joined TikTok in around 2022, I started posting about it and sharing snippets of scenes. That led to me recruiting five beta readers via TikTok after I put a video message out to see if any volunteers would be willing to read it and give their feedback. Getting honest, critical advice from readers I didn't already know really helped me to better understand what was working, what could be elevated and what could be removed.

What advice would you give other educators who might be interested in creating and publishing their own fiction?

I've found it exceptionally difficult to manage the two careers of writing/content creation and teaching, especially since I'm still near the start of my teaching career. The saving grace for me was having a first draft to work from, plus a detailed plan for future books. If I have a two-hour window at the end of my day after doing my marking, I'll use the time to focus solely on a specific scene with certain characters and an outcome that's already been planned. The more detailed my planning is, the easier the scenes are to write, as I'm not just sitting there staring at a blank screen. Your initial plan doesn't have to be perfect, but the more detailed it is, the easier it will be to execute later on.

Andy Darcy Theo is a secondary school psychology teacher and continues to post on TikTok and Instagram as @andydarcytheo

Humans in a DIGITAL WORLD

Anthony David examines how the increasing adoption of AI should prompt us to reclaim the skills that make us whole

Having initially been a bit overexcited at the launch of ChatGPT 3.5 in November 2022, we're now moving away from asking, '*How can I use AI?*' to '*Why am I using AI at all?*'

This shift from function to purpose isn't just a pivot in vocabulary – it's arguably a turning point in our culture and in education. And the turning point seems to have hit us quickly.

A moral realism

As someone who has championed the potential of artificial intelligence and led training across schools, I remain excited about what AI can offer. It can free up time, personalise learning, analyse patterns and expose insights we might miss. Used wisely, AI can be a partner in our pursuit of personal growth. But if we're not careful – by treating AI as simply a clever tool, or outsourcing too much of our thinking to it – we risk bypassing the very capacities that make us human.

My recent book, *Education, AI and Human Thought*, begins with a simple question: *What does it mean to be a human being in the age of intelligent machines?* The answers I found were neither anti-technology, nor technophilic. Rather, they pointed towards a kind of moral realism – the need for us to shape the digital world as humans, and not allow ourselves to be unthinkingly reshaped by it.

We're at a threshold. The old scripts of qualifications, careers and even certain types of knowledge no longer prepare young people for the world. Jobs are changing, and sometimes disappearing. Social structures are shifting. Within this landscape, we need to consider what human skills will endure.

"Not all information is wisdom, and not every output is trustworthy"

By that, I don't merely mean 'transferable skills'; I mean *deep* skills, such as habits of thought, ways of being that help a person remain grounded, relational, imaginative and wise in a world that increasingly prioritises speed, automation and abstraction.

Discernment over data

One of the first skills we need to recover is that of discernment. Not all information is wisdom, and not every output is trustworthy. As AI floods our learning spaces with possibility, our young people will need to learn how to weigh, question and judge, rather than simply consume.

This isn't about cynicism. It's about moral courage and intellectual humility. It's about asking not just, '*What does the AI say?*' but '*Is this good?*' '*Is this true?*' '*Who benefits from this decision?*' Because without discernment, we risk amplifying injustice at digital speed. AI shouldn't be used as an excuse for delegating thought.

Screens flatten us. The digital life can easily draw us out of our bodies, our communities and even our sense of self. The risk is that, when used poorly, we

could see whole classes constantly attached to screens. I'm not trying to be overly dramatic – these changes are taking place already, and when implemented well, can really enhance learning. Yet relationships must continue to form the foundations of learning and growth. There has to be a balance.

We need to cultivate skills of presence; of being comfortable with one another, listening deeply, making eye contact, noticing silence and attending to emotion. These aren't soft skills. They're survival skills for a relational species.

Schools that intentionally teach children oracy skills, such as leadership, debating or presentation, are offering a vehicle for this, as hinted at by the government's recent interim Curriculum Review. Perhaps this is something that more of us can and should be grasping with both hands?

Creative and ethical imagination

Tomorrow's challenges – climate change, technological advancement, population displacement – will require young people who can imagine different futures, not just optimise the systems we use already. Imagination isn't a luxury, but a moral necessity. We must teach children to think beyond the given, to ask '*What if?*' and realise their own sense of agency in shaping the world anew.

At the same time, however, creativity untethered from ethics is dangerous. That's why moral imagination is key. It's not just an ability to envision the 'new' that's needed, but a willingness to anchor that vision in justice, compassion and the common good.

AI excels in certainty (and is often exceptionally polite with it), but human life is lived in the grey. We need to help young people become comfortable with uncertainty. Not to fear it, or flee from it, but to navigate it with grace.

That means teaching skills of emotional regulation, reflective thinking and adaptive learning. It means modelling vulnerability as educators. It means holding space for questions that don't have answers. Our young people don't need all the answers; what they need is the resilience to live with that tension.

The wisdom of slowness

Speed is the idol of the age. The faster the system, the better the score – but wisdom often comes slowly.

We need schools where reflection isn't a luxury, but a rhythm. Where stillness isn't idleness, but invitation. The very human skills of listening, creating, empathising and thinking deeply all require time – which is why perhaps the most radical thing we can do in a digital world is *slow down*. To create time for wonder, for conversation, for connecting the dots and asking, '*What really matters here?*'

It's said that sometimes, the most creative people only need a bit of boredom. As things stand currently, I'm hopeful. Across the schools I work with, I see leaders and educators wanting something more than just efficiency. They want meaning. They want wholeness. They want to prepare their students to not just use technology, but to live well in a world shaped by it.

To be clear, I'm not anti-AI. I am pro-human, and believe the two can co-exist – indeed, *must* co-exist – if we're to build a future worth inhabiting. But to do so, we must shift the centre of gravity in the conversations we're having.

The question isn't simply about what AI can do, but about what it means to live wisely, relationally and justly within the digital world we're creating. The answer, I think, begins with remembering who we are.

IN BRIEF

In a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, the most vital skills aren't technical but human. We need to move beyond the question of *how* to use AI and begin asking *why* we use it, and what kind of people we're becoming in the process.

As both an AI ambassador and an educator, I believe that relational, ethical and imaginative capacities must be central to how we prepare young people. The future of work will demand adaptability, creativity, discernment and moral courage – all qualities that can't be replicated by machines.

Students need more than proficiency in prompt engineering or digital literacy. They need the wisdom to judge when and why to use a tool. They need the resilience to hold space for ambiguity. They need the presence to build real human relationships in an increasingly virtual world.

If we want to live humanly in a digital world, then our curriculum must reflect that. We must cultivate deep, rather than simply functional skills, habits of attention, imagination and moral reflection. These aren't optional extras but are, in fact, the very foundations of a meaningful future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Anthony David is an executive headteacher in London and author of the book *Education, AI and Human Thought*

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A silent addiction

Why we owe it to our students to confront the purposefully addictive nature of social media and its frequently malign impacts

Would you approve of illicit drugs being used by students in your school? How about the smoking of cigarettes or vapes? Alcohol use? I'd hope that your answer to each of those would be an emphatic 'no'.

As staff, we understand that these things, even if legal, are damaging and highly addictive. We know that our students – no matter how bright – aren't fully capable of making rational decisions about substances that could decimate their young lives.

Slithering distractions

Teenagers live with an optimism that assumes tragedies only befall other people, and that's part of their charm. We want them to believe in the possibilities and potential of a bright future, but it also means they underestimate risk.

So we protect them. We set rules. We ban vapes and alcohol on school grounds for reasons of safeguarding. We know that addiction can consume even the most diligent among us, if given the chance.

So why do we lack that same clarity when it comes to social media and phone use? Because what, exactly, is social media doing in our schools? Is it a learning tool? A driver of creativity? Or a silent, slithering distraction – always nearby, whispering comparisons, likes and notifications into our students' ears?

The ache of withdrawal

Social media isn't harmless. It's an algorithm-driven, dopamine-spiking machine that's engineered to be addictive. And it's working as intended.

I've been told that this is an overreaction. "*Kids today aren't addicted,*" others tell me. "*It's just modern life.*" "*Adapt or be left behind.*" But they're not seeing what I'm seeing.

I was raised by an alcoholic. I know what addiction looks like. I used to smoke, and can remember the physical ache of withdrawal. If you can recall how it feels to witness, or experience the comedown from any type of addiction, you can spot it in others a mile off.

I once took a group of students to a Scout camp, where they had to surrender their phones upon arrival, and what I witnessed was startling. Day 1 – anxiety. Day 2 – anger, even rage. Some experienced full-blown physical symptoms in the form of shakes, panic and tears. This was withdrawal, plain and simple.

But then came Day 4, and I suddenly saw children again. Real children. Not teens curating their lives for an audience, or measuring their worth in likes – just young people laughing, playing and connecting. They climbed trees, told jokes, sat around a fire. They were present. For many, it was the first time they'd felt like that in years.

Walking on eggshells

Yet somehow, the idea of banning social media in schools remains controversial. '*They need to learn how to navigate it!*' we're told. True – but we don't teach the dangers of drink-driving by handing out a set of car keys and a bottle of vodka, do we?

'*They need to be prepared for modern life!*' I agree wholeheartedly, but preparation doesn't mean surrender. Disinformation is has become part of modern life too, and we don't let that go unchecked.

'*They'll just use it anyway.*' Maybe – but again, we don't allow smoking in corridors just because a few students might otherwise light up in the toilets. I'm not suggesting we pretend that the digital world doesn't exist – we do need to educate students about social media – but education doesn't require unrestricted access. It requires boundaries and honesty.

We see the impact of phones and social media every day. The shrinking attention spans, spiralling mental health challenges, the rising anxiety. Students checking phones under desks, zoning out of lessons, glued to the validation loop of likes and comments.

So why are we letting these platforms into our classrooms? Why do we act as if that's inevitable and we're powerless to stop it? Because we're *not* powerless. Schools should be sanctuaries. Places of safety, focus and growth. Unfettered access to social media isn't compatible with that mission. At best, it's a distraction. At worst, it's deeply damaging.

So let's stop pretending otherwise. Let's stop walking on eggshells around this issue and have the courage to do what we know is right. Let's protect our students from the addiction we're too afraid to name.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

'I, Teacher' is a secondary teacher, teacher trainer and writer challenging binary teaching narratives. For more information, visit **theteacherfilesexposed.wordpress.com** or follow **@i-teacher.bsky.social**

TIPS FOR...

5 A stress-free trip

Advice from Voyager School Travel on how to focus your trips on what matters most – inspiring students

30 SECOND BRIEFING

Voyager School Travel provides overseas trips and immersive language residentials with our own accommodation, resort teams and coach company, delivering safe, stress-free adventures for over 32,000 passengers a year.

1 AVOID THE SUMMER TERM

If you're keen to organise trips for after exam season, you're not alone. Over half of all school trips take place between May and July, making it the most expensive and crowded time to travel. Autumn trips can be 30-50% cheaper and come with added benefits. Students tend to be more focused, with feedback showing higher satisfaction scores for autumn trips from both staff and pupils. Schools trips that are cheaper, calmer *and* more impactful? It's a win-win.

2 BEWARE OF GOING IT ALONE

DIY school trips might seem cheaper, but they entail risk. If you book your flights, activities and hotels separately, and one part goes wrong, the rest often won't be protected.

With a trusted provider like Voyager, you'll have a single point of contact and backup from our own staff abroad, coach company and 24-hour helpline. Plus, if disaster strikes – such as an airport closure – we can step in and get your group home safely. Why shoulder the stress when we can do that for you?

3 DON'T LEAVE IT TOO LATE

We get it, you're busy – but leaving your planning too late limits your options. For the best flights, accommodation and excursions, *book early*. Plan at least 12 months ahead and you'll be getting better value, while avoiding date clashes and giving parents more time to pay. To make the whole process easier, we can provide a free trip planning toolkit with helpful timelines, useful templates and assorted tips.

Voyager School Travel

Contact:
01273 827 327 | voyagerschooltravel.com

4 EXPLORE YOUR FINANCIAL PROTECTION OPTIONS

Parents will want assurances that their money is safe and so will you. Before booking, check that your provider is properly accredited – through, for example, the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge and membership of the School Travel Forum. Also ensure that they're bonded by Air Travel Organisers' Licensing (ATOL) or the Association of Bonded Travel Organisers Trust (ABTOT), which both guarantee refunds or repatriation if a supplier fails. Otherwise, your school could be liable for costs. Accreditations are more than just logos – they're a vital safety net.

5 CHECK THE SMALL PRINT

Not all quotes are created equal. Some travel companies leave out key costs, like insurance or air passenger duty (as much as £90 for a New York flight), or provide only 'estimated' flight prices, leading to awkward conversations with parents later.

At Voyager School Travel, our quotes are fully inclusive and transparent. You'll know the exact accommodation, transport, and total costs before you commit – with no hidden extras or surprises.

About Voyager School Travel

Truly educational trips – We specialise in immersive language residentials and curriculum-focused tours that help students build confidence and cultural capital

Expert support – Our experienced teams in the UK and France can support trip leaders with everything from bespoke itineraries, to safety management and leading activities

Peace of mind – With our own accommodation centres, coach fleet and transparent pricing in place, you can rest assured that you're in safe hands

A proven reputation – 90% of teachers who have previously used our services have in turn recommend Voyager School Travel to their colleagues

THIS WAY!

School improvement advice for headteachers and SLT

PARENTS | BUDGETING | FINANCE

Sharing THE LOAD

Can schools have a role to play in easing the financial burden on parents? Sue Birchall shares her thoughts...

In these times of budget constraints and uncertainty around future funding, we could be excused for taking the view that charity starts at home, and that the money coming into our schools and academies is all allocated and needed for day-to-day expenses. Certainly, in my setting, our priority is to ensure that the needs of the whole school community come first.

There is, however, an increasing expectation that schools should be doing more to support financially disadvantaged students and their families. The current financial situation most schools are in makes such expectations often hard to meet, though – so are there any ways in which we can support our families that are sustainable and affordable for all concerned?

Different contexts

Our roles all exist in order to educate our young people, but our contexts aren't all the same. This makes any decisions over how and what we should be financially supporting dependant on your cohort and particular circumstances.

It would certainly be easier if there was a convenient 'one size fits all' policy governing what expectations should be when it comes to schools providing financial support, but as things stand, we have only non-statutory guidance, such as the DfE's 'Charging for school activities' policy (see tinyurl.com/ts145-HT1). This means that any school or academy policies outlining what you expect in terms of financial contributions from parents must be clear and succinct.

The statutory elements of funding that all schools must observe are straightforward, and should always form part of your wider budget planning process. You'll need to ensure that sufficient funds are set aside to cover educational visits and any other areas identified elsewhere in your school or academy policies. Done well, this bit is relatively easy.

The less easy bit is how you should go about managing the risks of non-payment and defaults on the part of parents, requests from parents for support with school costs, and your ability to fund important school trips while receiving less in the way of parental contributions.

Allocating funds

As a long-serving school business professional, I've experienced these kinds of budget pressures first-hand over many years, and tried perhaps every possible way of addressing such needs as they come up. Whilst I'm happy to share some of my experiences with you here, I should point out that they won't necessarily work in every setting. I've seen various levels of success from them myself at different times, so treat them more as potential ideas and starting points, rather than absolute recommendations.

To start with, there's the funding we (and in all likelihood, you) receive for disadvantaged students in the form of Pupil Premium. One of the more obvious ways of internally supporting families has been through our Pupil Premium strategies – which has now become easier to do, following a loosening of government restrictions on what those funds can be used for.

Allocating some of this funding to support school meals, for instance, is one such use, since we all know that a student doesn't learn well when they're hungry. In my setting, we set some PP funds aside for subsidised items of uniform, school trips and school equipment. We also operate a hardship fund and breakfast provision, partly supported by PP funding.

Outside assistance

If we want to go beyond this, then the only practical route is to secure additional sources of funding – one of which could be sponsorship of your school by one or more external organisations. If you're thinking that doesn't sound easy, then you'd be right – but having tried various forms of this myself in the past, I've found that there are some key points worth noting.

The best sponsorship arrangements tend to emerge out of existing external relationships. We've done this by looking at local companies and individuals, and then proposing partnerships with our school via the traditional careers route, finding commonalities and making a connection. Once you're past the point of initial contact, you can then broach the question of how they might be able to support you – potentially in kind, or via volunteer support in the first instance,

ARE YOUR PARENTS IN THE LOOP?

Schools use a range of methods to keep families informed. Some parents like the convenience of checking homework, behaviour updates and lunch money balances on their phones. Others prefer a quick phone call for urgent matters, and texts or emails for everything else.

The challenge lies in finding the right balance, so that families can be kept engaged and informed without feeling overwhelmed, or overloaded with unnecessary administration.

A good first step is to understand what information parents value most, and how they prefer to receive it. These insights can then be used to devise a communications strategy that ensures relevant information is shared consistently, in a way that's easy for parents to act on.

Patterns and trends

The information schools record around attendance, behaviour, progress and wellbeing can be used to spot trends and intervene earlier to support individual students, year groups and cohorts across a trust.

Your data may, for example, show a pupil receiving fewer behaviour warnings after lunch. This could indicate that they're arriving at school in the morning without having had breakfast, but are more settled once they've eaten. A quick chat with the child and their family – perhaps with an invitation to join the school's breakfast club? – could be all that's needed to get them back on track.

It might also be possible to see that the number of pupils in school drops sharply during the final two weeks of the spring term, and that those children with lower attendance are more likely to fall behind. Knowing this, a school or trust could plan out a targeted campaign of parental communications highlighting the importance of routine, and offering practical tips they can use to keep their children motivated as the term draws to a close. Sharing information in this way can both strengthen home-school links and improve student outcomes.

Home-school communication that makes a difference

Schools that take a proactive approach to communication – sharing timely, tailored information that parents want and need – will see a positive impact on pupils' progress relatively quickly.

Whether it's spotting patterns in attendance across a group of schools, or gaining a clearer understanding of the circumstances behind a single pupil's behaviour, open and timely communication is the foundation schools and families need if they're to work together effectively and help students succeed.

Four steps to better parental engagement

1. **Share a range of information** – This can include attendance, behaviour and pupil rewards. Highlighting both successes and areas where support may be required will help to build strong home-school relationships.

2. **Surveys of parents and guardians** – Ensure you're providing the information they value, in the formats they prefer.

3. **Establish clear communication channels** – Use phone calls for urgent matters, and app notifications, texts or emails for routine updates.

4. **Set consistent expectations** – You can increase parents' trust and levels of engagement by clarifying what information will be shared with them and when.

Edward Farmilo is a former teacher, now senior leader for education at the school payments, communications and data provider VenturEd Solutions; for more information, visit venturedsolutions.co.uk

"There is an increasing expectation that schools should be doing more to support financially disadvantaged students"

and then financially later on.

Sponsorship can also be secured through the writing and submission of bids. Our school sports kit, for example, is funded through a yearly bid programme offered by a local supermarket. Having our kit sponsored has left room in our budget to allow for the purchase of school uniform items for our more disadvantaged students.

Submitting successful funding and/or sponsorship bids to support the cost of your school trips and equipment does take a bit of practice – but it's staff time that'll be well spent when the rewards can be so high.

We also regularly encourage donations of used school uniform items, which we'll distribute to our families in need where we can. If you lack the required storage and distribution capacity within your school, there are some companies who'll take on the task for you at a small cost. Some settings will maintain a school fund they can use for supporting parents – but be aware that it's essential to establish a clear and transparent policy of precisely what those funds will be used for.

Financial resilience

These are just a few practical suggestions, but how viable they are in your setting will be very much informed by your student cohort and the needs of their families.

It could be argued that our education system currently falls down a little when it comes to promoting and teaching financial resilience and knowledge to students and their families, but it doesn't have to be this way. Some banks offer learning materials and resources that schools can opt to use when educating students on these areas as part of PSHE lessons or extracurricular sessions. With further funding and the will of policymakers, this kind of financial education could perhaps one day be extended to parents and families.

For now, though, one thing we can do is ensure that parents are fully aware of our policies, and all the costs associated with their children attending our schools. Wherever possible, we should be looking to keep those costs at the most affordable level we can – whether they be for uniforms, PE kits and trips.

At the same time, it's vital to maintain contact with any parents who default on payments, and uncover the reasons as to why. Whilst it is important to have policies in place around non-payment, and to ensure these are enforced, we should also remember that any family can find themselves in a situation when making payments to your school is hard, or even impossible – in which case, it's our responsibility to support them in achieving the best outcome for the school and the student.

Sue Birchall is the School Business Leader at The Malling School, Kent

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Do schools have a moral responsibility to support families in financial hardship, and what does that look like? How do we identify those with genuine need, and what can we do?

As well as complete transparency in any costs that we ask to be subsidised, making sure that we share our charging policies, and listening to our family's needs to ensure any additional costs are fair and set at an appropriate level, is a good start. Yes, some costs are out of our control – such as school meals – but there are many we can influence, such as the setting of uniform costs, the trips we offer, the equipment and resources students will require, and the charges for clubs and activities.

If an activity is tied to something within the curriculum, then we are bound to cover the cost or else not run the trip or programme at all. If it isn't, then we can give thought to offering a subsidy for hardship, offering payment terms or providing direct funding. This could also give students opportunities to raise monies through other means, such as fundraising and grant bidding – all useful skills.

Embedding a culture of joint support into our school ethos will help to get parents on board with your school or academy from the very first day of induction. Keep in mind that all the school decisions you make should prevent unaffordable choices from being made, and ideally result in a win for all concerned.

IMMERSE *yourself in art*

Give your students a whole new appreciation of art and design via a school-wide arts week – **Hannah Day** shows you how...

As we approach the end of the academic year, we have the opportunity to consider how we might want to use this time differently.

One way is to organise a whole-school arts week. An arts week will allow you to celebrate students' achievements through participation – focusing more on how students can engage with, and support one another, rather than on the evidence they can produce, while also encouraging students for whom creativity is at the heart of how they connect with the world.

Put simply, celebrating loudly the joys and benefits of the arts seems like a great way to round off the year. So here are some ways of doing just that...

Get organised

Decide when and for how long you intend to hold the event. If a week seams too long, perhaps look into organising a two-day event and expanding next year, once you've had more time to plan ahead.

Will there be any budget available, or will you need to organise some fundraising? Will some elements – like organised trips – involve any additional costs? What will be the key roles and requirements expected of staff once the event is up and running?

Having given due consideration to those areas, you'll then need to reflect on the following questions regarding logistics:

- On what days of the week will your arts sessions be taking place?
- Will any sessions be repeated for different classes or year groups?
- How many students should there be in each group?
- What is the cost per head likely to be?

Thinking about these sorts of questions will enable you to create a timetable, complete with costs and details of how the event will be resourced. Where possible, try to offer more options than you'll actually need, so that students are more likely to get their first choice of activity, and end up in manageably sized groups.

> *"The pressure is off, letting students who might not consider themselves as 'creative' to find out that perhaps they are..."*

Give it breadth

Make sure that this is a school-wide project. Having just completed timed assessments, marking and possibly an end of year show, your art team will be tired. Who else can help, and who will be responsible for what?

The week can, and should be about creativity in all its forms. Yes, include the visual arts, of course – but don't forget about dance, drama, music, creative writing and poetry. If students are given a broader range of options to choose from, you'll be able to spread the weight of responsibility more evenly and ensure that there will be several different departments all contributing to making the event work.

Beyond that, what skills might teachers from other departments be able to contribute? You may well find a maths teacher who happens to be a keen watercolourist, or an RE teacher who regularly writes poetry in their spare time.

Think big, think small.

For some students – those who love creativity, and who feel confident in their creative ideas and skills – this may be the most exciting week of the year. For this group, think *big*. Devise a couple of week-long projects they can choose between – such as painting a mural on a school wall, mounting a mini theatre production devised by the group themselves, or perhaps a group composition that combines the musical talents of a mix of students.

Others might prefer to dip their toe into a wide range of comparatively low stakes activities. For them, a series of day-long options, combined together to form a full week, could up open up many different creative avenues they've yet to experience. Workshops for teaching knitting; collage; basic photo editing and more – without the requirement

to produce and evaluate a specific outcome, the pressure will be off, allowing students who might not normally consider themselves as 'creative' to find out that maybe they are, after all…

Mix and Match

Not everything has to be 100% creative. At my last school, we'd offer a two-day photograph option within our creative week. Day 1 entailed a trip to the zoo, where students were given tips on how to take a range of different shots, while day 2 involved a mix of darkroom and digital work.

Check what's close to you, and how the trip could be incorporated into an option that appeals for both its own joys, and for how far it can have a creative element embedded within it.

Enlist some (free) support

Local colleges and universities will always be keen to visit and provide information sessions, but rather than serve up the usual 'death by PowerPoint', have them do something genuinely practical. We've previously hosted a variety of sessions from local universities, including ones on stop-frame animation and publishing a zine. What's more, they've all been free, since they've allowed the universities to build much-needed links with us, as a local feeder institution.

Include a careers element

We have a number of interesting people who live locally, and are willing share with our students the details of their creative working life. Could you organise a Q&A with a local writer, painter or dancer?

I remember one particularly good talk where a local illustrator brought in his A Level work. By his own admission, it wasn't strong – and yet here he now was, regularly designing album and book covers, winning competitions and even teaching part-time too. The encouragement he gave in showing where he started, compared to where he was now, was incredibly valuable for our students. So often, we'll see the finished professional work, while easily forgetting that everyone started somewhere.

Be nosy

We've also been invited to people's studios. Such visits may necessitate a small group, due to the size of most artists' working spaces, but being allowed in to see how and where people work can be truly inspiring. It can make just the very idea of living and working as a creative person seem that much more attainable.

Add some STEAM

Much of art can be linked to science. Could your school's physics teachers perform a practical session on how light and colour works?

Alternatively, a chemistry lesson could explore how dyes can be made from natural sources. This might appeal to those students who view themselves as firmly scientific, or at least help them see how all subjects can be linked in different ways. It could also help to bring on board staff from other departments, who may in turn further contribute to the variety and dynamics of your programme.

Make space for less grand activities

For many students, the joys of learning how to crochet, book bind, marble or applique within the quiet confines of a small group will amount to their perfect week. Including smaller, more calm groups will allow for the building of important relationships between students and teachers.

These activities can further help to improve students' dexterity and precision – both of which are vital for any aspiring engineers and surgeons…

Don't forget to evaluate

Finally, get your students to rate the sessions – out of 10, via a traffic light system, whatever works for you. That way, you'll know more reliably which sessions they loved and which turned out to be… not so great.

(Also, if there were any sessions that your teacher colleagues found to be especially challenging or disappointing, they can be dropped next year and potentially replaced with more workable alternatives).

Within a few years, you'll have all this down to a tee, with your arts week (or day, or even month) widely considered to be one of the highlights of the school year.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Need some further inspiration? Then take a look at what these providers can offer…

The National Gallery of Art, New York
Curates a wide range of short videos viewable online that can be used as good starting points for various sessions – 'D.I.Y. Art: Fabric Stamps Inspired by Henri Matisse' being a particularly good example.
nga.gov

The National Gallery
Here in the UK, The National Gallery goes one better by offering schools access to live, Zoom-delivered sessions right from the classroom, entirely free of charge.
nationalgallery.org.uk

The National Society for Education in Art and Design
The organisation's website includes a 'teacher inspiration section', covering drawing, design, craft, digital and more, providing a wealth of interesting ideas to help get you started.
nsead.org

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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Let's talk oracy

If we want to see a better standard of speaking in our classrooms, perhaps we just need to show some patience, muses **Jennifer Hampton**...

Two years ago, I researched the state of oracy in UK schools for an article in this magazine. What I found painted a bleak picture. While there was – and still is – a focus on spoken language in the National Curriculum, there were no longer any national mechanisms to ensure the promotion of talk and build excellent communicators in our classrooms.

A 2021 report from The Centre of Education and Youth and Oxford University (see tinyurl.com/ts145-01) told us that the term 'spoken language' was "*barely featured*" in Ofsted's report recommendations. That same year, the Oracy All Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry's final report (see tinyurl.com/ts145-02) stated that the "*Status and provision of oracy education in England today falls significantly short.*"

More recently, however, it seems that things are changing...

Changing times

2024 saw the publication of a report from the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England, entitled 'We Need To Talk' (see tinyurl.com/ts145-03), which acknowledged the lack of a mutually agreed definition of oracy. Having engaged with a range of stakeholders, the commission finally produced the following definition: "*Articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication*".

The report further acknowledged how a continuing lack of consensus between practitioners, leaders and academics has presented a barrier for policymakers. With a consensus now in place regarding what oracy actually is, could we be looking at some major changes in the near future?

2023, the year in which my original article was published, was dominated by the immediate aftermath of school closures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also the year that saw Andrew and Christian Tate indicted by Romanian authorities on charges of human trafficking.

This was, however, a time before the commencement of Donald Trump's tumultuous second term as US president, and the huge geopolitical shifts it's already caused. It was before Reform UK made its presence felt on the national stage – first by gaining five MPs in the 2024 General Election, and then coming first in the 2025 Local Elections.

When I last wrote about oracy in these pages, it was before that year's October Hamas attacks, and Israel's subsequent retaliation and ongoing military assault on Gaza. Artificial intelligence wasn't as readily available at our fingertips as it is now.

Considering just how much the social and political landscape has changed in such a short time, to what extent are we seeing those changes reflected in education? And could the nature of those developments – the manosphere, Trump, populism, the conflict in Gaza – perhaps affect the value we place on our students' communication skills?

Breadth and depth

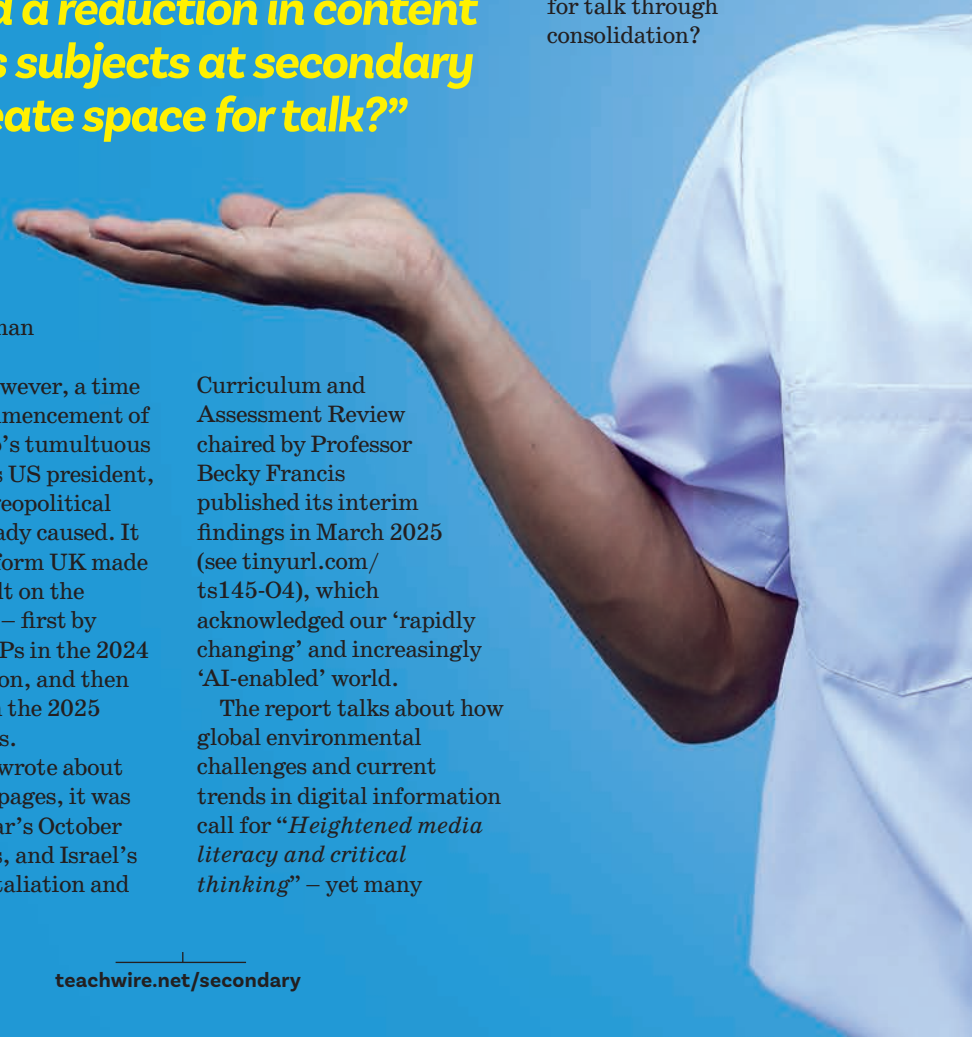
To an extent, that seems to be what's happening. The Curriculum and Assessment Review chaired by Professor Becky Francis published its interim findings in March 2025 (see tinyurl.com/ts145-04), which acknowledged our 'rapidly changing' and increasingly 'AI-enabled' world.

The report talks about how global environmental challenges and current trends in digital information call for "*Heightened media literacy and critical thinking*" – yet many watchers were left disappointed with its failure to mention oracy.

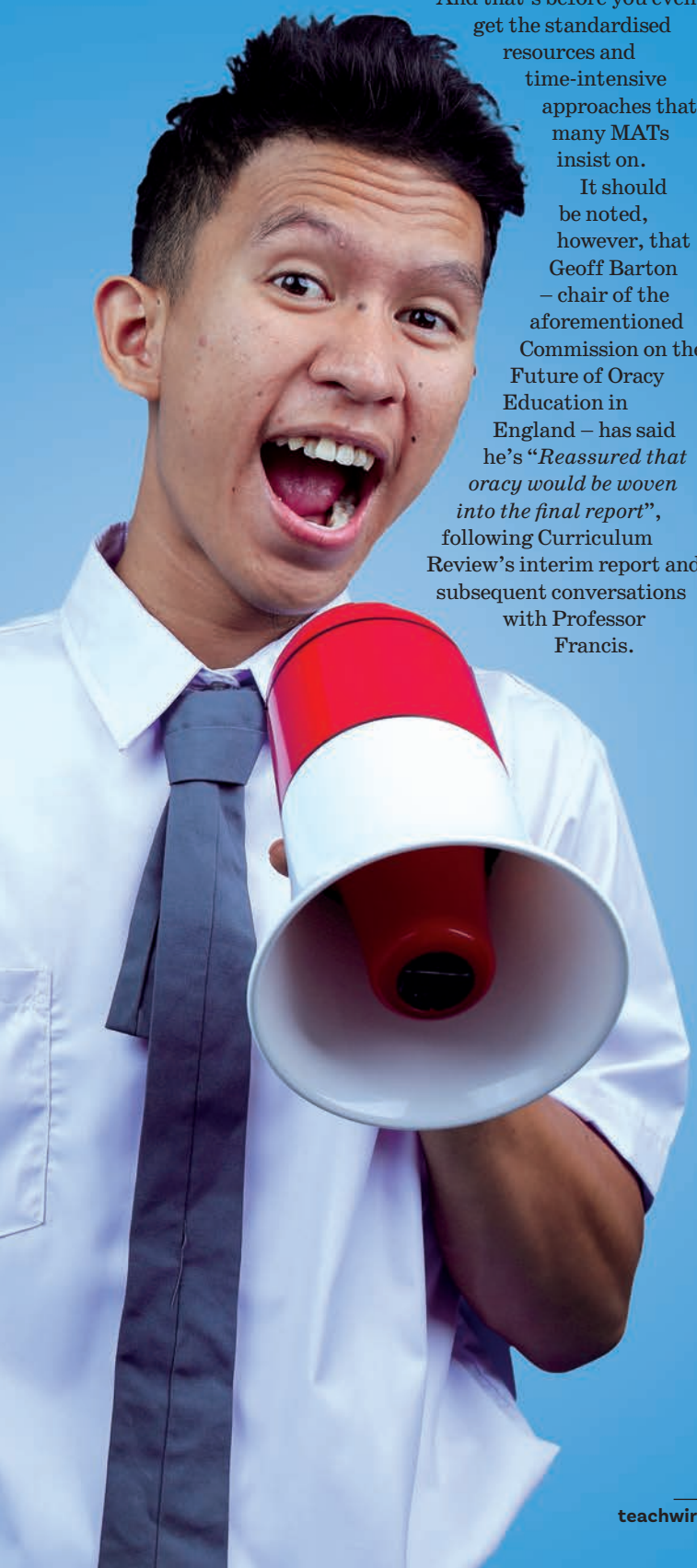
It comes close to doing so in places – with references to skills, and the need for "*More applied knowledge in certain areas to support young people to be ready for life and work*" – but there's nothing in there that specifically addresses if and how we should be approaching talk within our classrooms.

The report's authors do express concerns around the 'volume of content' within the existing knowledge-rich curriculum, trade-offs between breadth and depth. Could a reduction in content across subjects at secondary potentially create space for talk through consolidation?

"Could a reduction in content across subjects at secondary create space for talk?"



It's possible that the interim report, without explicitly stating so, is calling for learning environments that support learning to talk and talk about learning. At any rate, that's what many teachers and advisors I've spoken to are hoping to see from the panel's final report, which is due to be published this autumn.



Ofsted's view

Some teachers have spoken out about how the knowledge-rich curriculum era has led to heavy subject content demands squeezing out opportunities to engage in rich classroom discourse. And that's before you even get the standardised resources and time-intensive approaches that many MATs insist on.

It should be noted, however, that Geoff Barton – chair of the aforementioned Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England – has said he's "*Reassured that oracy would be woven into the final report*", following Curriculum Review's interim report and subsequent conversations with Professor Francis.

So what's Ofsted's view? In March 2024, the regulator published a report on the teaching of English that sought to evaluate what it perceived as schools' strengths and weaknesses in this area across the country (see tinyurl.com/ts145-05). As well as clearly stating that "*Schools do not consider spoken language well in their curriculum*," the report puts forward some firm recommendations aimed at ensuring "*The National Curriculum requirements are translated into practice*.'

This appeared to signal a significant shift away from where things stood, back when the CFEY and Oxford University observed that 'spoken language' barely featured in Ofsted's reports at all.

Going forward

All stakeholders, from classroom teachers to policymakers, broadly agree that our world is undergoing a series of dramatic changes in the technological, political and environmental spheres. The reforms brought about in 2014 by Michael Gove and the coalition government need to be re-examined and overhauled. Too many students with SEND, and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds aren't achieving the standards currently being demanded by our testing regimes.

Every teacher who has entered the profession since then will be unfamiliar with teaching outside of the knowledge-rich curriculum. From this vantage point, it looks like we'll need to be patient while we wait to see if and how the incoming Curriculum Review changes will at last let us develop our young people into highly effective communicators – and then be patient a while longer, as we implement the various practices and approaches needed to make that happen.

SO... WHAT DO WE ACTUALLY MEAN BY 'ORACY EDUCATION'?

Oracy education is the intentional cultivation of the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and engage with others through speaking, listening and communication.

It comprises three interrelated, overlapping and mutually reinforcing components:

- **Learning to talk, listen and communicate**
  The development of children's speaking, listening and communication skills.
- **Learning through talk, listening and communication**
  The use of talk or dialogue to foster and deepen children's learning.
- **Learning about talk, listening and communication**
  Building knowledge and understanding of speaking, listening and communication in its many contexts.

– 'We Need To Talk' report produced by the Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England, October 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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The power of PROGRESS

Kit Betts-Masters tells us why the profession should be teaching students about the possibilities of a more optimistic technological and environmental future...

"*Climate change? Again?*" Up goes the familiar response from the students, as they enter the classroom and spot the starter slide. "*We've done this already! We get it – boomers used up the Earth's resources, filled the atmosphere with carbon dioxide and now we're all doomed.*" (I think we can forgive them for that last expression of opinion).

Climate change appears in each of the three science specifications at GCSE, and for good reason. It's undoubtedly the biggest challenge presently facing humanity. This current generation of young people feel both the responsibility to take action to halt it, and resentment at previous generations for having caused it, while in their eyes, taking next to no action to actually fix things.

And yes, some leaders are still running on 'clean coal' or '*Economy now, environment later*' slogans – but those policies will usually leave office when they do.

Outdated messaging

Climate crops up in every corner of GCSE science, across physics, chemistry and biology, but I think our teaching is a little outdated. We can all chant "*Remember to turn off the lights!*" – yet today's LEDs use a fraction of the power of those old filament bulbs.

Our students have heard the same gloomy headlines throughout their lives; our energy habits are fuelling global warming, habitats are shrinking, sea levels are rising, ice caps are melting and gigatonnes of CO_2 threaten an unstoppable runaway crisis. At the same time, however, there is *so much good news* – especially here in the UK.

Despite our tech use exploding over the last 20 years, coinciding with a growth in our population, overall energy demand has actually *fallen*, since our gadgets, appliances and manufacturing processes are now far more efficient than they used to be.

GREENHOUSE GASES AND GLOBAL WARMING

Electricity generation remains responsible for much of the CO_2 that's causing global warming, but show your students the flipside – that 92% of new power added worldwide last year was renewable. In the UK, just 30% of our generation in 2024 came from burning gas.

Source: IRENA Renewable Capacity Statistics, 2024

LIFE-CYCLE ASSESSMENTS

One of my favourite football shirts is made from ocean-bound plastic. Let students compare and score real garments using a simple LCA sheet. Have them check out Adidas' partnership with Parley to create trainers and sportswear, which has been running since 2015.

EVALUATING ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

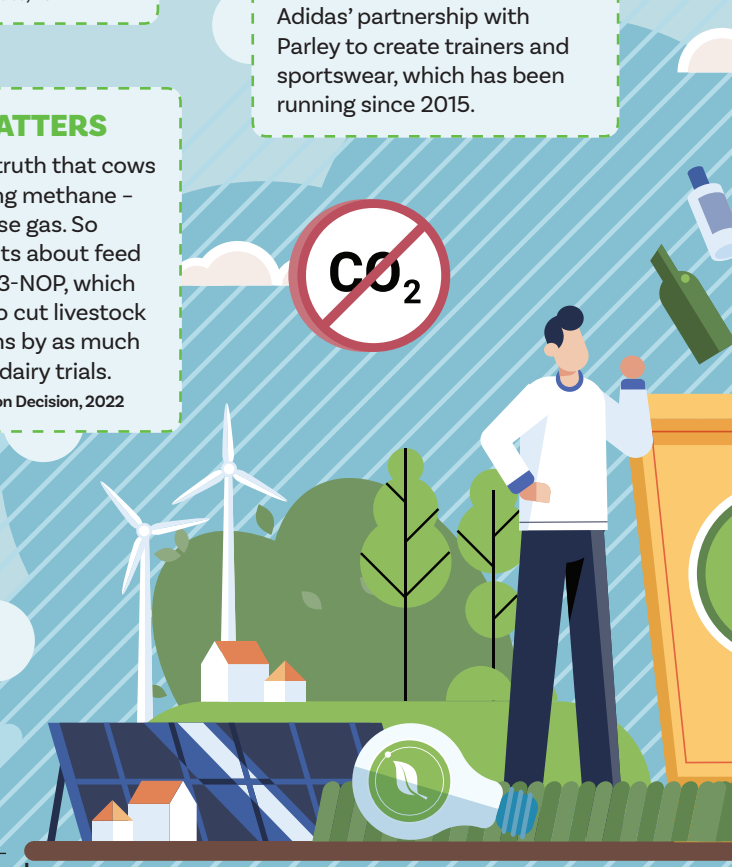
Show your class an eerie 1970s photo of a lifeless lake, and discuss with them the impact of acid rain – then show them a picture of the same lake today. Point out how UK SO_2 emissions have fallen > 90% since scientists began pushing for anti-pollution laws in the 1970s.

Source: Defra Air Pollutant Inventory, 2023

METHANE MATTERS

It's an irrefutable truth that cows fart, thus producing methane – another greenhouse gas. So teach your students about feed additives such as 3-NOP, which has been shown to cut livestock methane emissions by as much as 30% to 35% in dairy trials.

Source: EFSA Authorisation Decision, 2022



HUMANS, WASTE AND POLLUTION

Explain how less than 10% of PET plastic is recycled worldwide, which presents massive issues for both land and marine habitats. Then introduce your students to the PET-eating enzyme that can turn old bottles back into pristine plastic, prompting them to see how chemistry can present ways of 'looping' materials, instead of simply landfilling them.

Source: Carbios, 2023

For years, when students have complained that they're inheriting an environmental disaster, my stock response has been, "*It's not my generation that caused this. We spotted the scale of the problem, and now I'm teaching you about it so that your generation can solve it.*"

But now, I can go one better. I can explain to them that as a matter of fact, science is indeed solving the problem as we speak.

Optimistic teaching

In terms of your teaching, do you focus on those problems still inbound, or on solutions that are already working? Do you use up-to-date data? I personally use Kate Morley's National Grid: Live website at grid.iamkate.com, which lets you browse an array of UK energy data captured just now, yesterday, last week or last year.

"We spotted the scale of the problem – now I'm teaching you about it, so that your generation can solve it"

You'll be pleased to note that on sunny and windy days, only around 5% of our energy comes from fossil fuels, and that we no longer use coal or oil for energy generation *at all* in the UK. I'm anticipating the day in the very near future when our gas turbines won't be required either.

Can you provide your students with any examples of local individuals, or even alumni of your school, who are currently working in the environmental science sector? Can you tell stories about local areas where wildlife has returned, or habitat regeneration projects that have proved to be huge successes?

Reflect with your students. We want them to feel *less* anxious about the future, and to know that what we're teaching them now will equip them to join in with the next wave of breakthroughs. Below, I've pulled out areas of GCSE content addressing environmental science, and suggested some optimistic spins you could put on them in your lessons.

Forward momentum

The 'good news' stories are already on our rooftops and driveways. My daughter's excitement when her school commenced solar power generation and installed a new heat pump led us to install photovoltaic panels and buy an electric vehicle ourselves. Our roof now exports power, while our car charges on low-carbon electricity – proof that classroom messages can lead to real-world action.

Let's make sure we imbue our science lessons with similar forward momentum. Point students towards upbeat, aspirational YouTube explainers – like Cleo Abram's ''Huge If True' show, and Simon Clark's optimistic look at our climate future. Both are real science channels painting a very different picture to the lost cause that many people seem to think climate science has now become.

So make a point of updating those pie charts, celebrate the UK's climbing share of renewables – and above all, remind your students that their future careers can accelerate the shift. Our lessons aren't foreshadowing impending doom – because science is already in the early stages of identifying a solution.

THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT AND SATELLITES

Once you've explained the greenhouse effect (with reference to the absorption and emission of electromagnetic radiation at different wavelengths), you could discuss the European Space Agency's FORUM mission, which will use satellites to accurately measure outgoing infrared signals from Earth – thus providing yet more proof that better data drives better climate action.

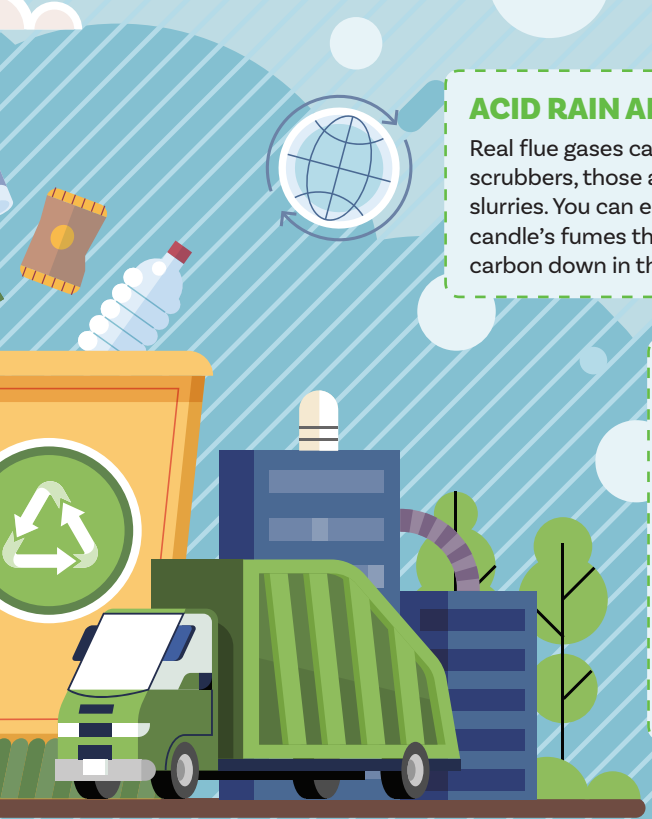
Source: ESA Mission Factsheet, 2024

BIODIVERSITY AND CONSERVATION

We can make the area of biodiversity more relatable, while reminding students that science is something they can *affect*, not just study. Thanks to the community Big Hedgehog Map created largely by schoolchildren (see bighedgehogmap.org), for example, urban hedgehog sighting records rose 39% between 2019 and 2023.

ACID RAIN AND PARTICULATES

Real flue gases carry acidic oxides. In power-station scrubbers, those acids are neutralised by alkaline slurries. You can easily model this by bubbling a candle's fumes through limewater, which locks the carbon down in the calcium carbonate solution.



DEFORESTATION AND BIODIVERSITY

You've probably heard the stat about how 'an area the size of Wales' is lost from the Amazon each year. That was true in 2019. However, with new government monitoring policies involving the use of satellites, rangers and indigenous teams having taken effect, the rate of Amazon forest loss fell 55% last year.

Source: INPE PRODES report, 2024

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

Q&A

"The impact can be transformative"

Stephen Toone outlines the health, social and financial benefits of upgrading your multi-use games area to become an all-weather facility.

30 SECOND BRIEFING

Fordingbridge is the UK's leading provider of all-weather solutions for the education sector, designing and installing off-the-shelf and bespoke canopy solutions for multi-use games areas (MUGAs), outdoor learning and dining areas, social spaces, walkways and bike storage.

Why have MUGAs become so popular in recent years?
I think COVID helped us all realise just how important spending time outside was to our health and wellbeing. Across the education sector we've seen more and more schools creating facilities that enable students to enjoy being outdoors year-round, and seeing huge benefits as a result.

What are the biggest benefits of creating year-round outdoor sports facilities?
The most obvious is that whatever the British weather throws at you and your students, our MUGA canopies can cope with it! Another big consideration is that it makes your facilities more attractive for hosting after-school clubs, inter-school tournaments and even for hiring out. Several of the schools we've worked with have been able to bring in additional revenue after upgrading their sports facilities.

What key considerations should schools think about when installing a cover for their MUGA?
Because we're Brits, we tend to focus on rain, sleet and snow when we think about all-weather protection – but it's also important to factor in the sun. Our unique Opal 60 canopy fabric allows 60% light penetration to create a lovely, airy playing experience, whilst simultaneously protecting students from harmful UV rays. Enabling daylight penetration can also be an important step towards saving on lighting costs!

FORDINGBRIDGE
inspiring design + build

Contact:
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Are there any other design considerations you'd advise schools to bear in mind?
MUGA canopies are large structures, so you want to make sure they fit in as seamlessly as possible with their surroundings. We can create hybrid steel and wood structures to suit natural surroundings, or we can powder coat steel structures in a school's custom colours.

It's also worth thinking about protecting your facilities from debris like twigs and wet leaves, which can damage courts and create dangerous or slippery surfaces. Mesh sides are a great way of doing this, while still allowing the airflow needed to create optimal playing conditions.

ABOUT STEPHEN:
Stephen Toone is the Managing Director of Fordingbridge

Are there any emerging trends in this area that schools should be aware of?
Sustainability is a growing consideration, and there are lots of ways to ensure your MUGA canopy is more sustainable. At Fordingbridge, all of our structures are made from materials that are fully recyclable at the end of their lifetime, and we also manufacture all our structures in-house to minimise the carbon footprint of each of our builds. Ensuring that any canopy you create can easily be added to or converted is another way of ensuring sustainable use.

What's the difference?

+ Complimentary, expert site visits to help you transform your vision into a reality
+ Design, manufacture and installation carried out by a single team for a seamless stress-free experience
+ All Fordingbridge education canopies come with a sector-leading 25-year guarantee

FOCUS ON: MATHS

We examine the struggles students can have in applying mathematical concepts to the real world; how bringing numbers to life can unlock learners' latent maths skills; and why we neglect those Y7 knowledge gaps at our peril...

How can schools develop students' confidence when it comes to learning maths?

THE AGENDA:

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What's the problem?

Ama Dickson looks at why the process of getting students to apply mathematical concepts to real-world scenarios doesn't always run as smoothly as it should...

Problem solving continues to be an area of maths that many students struggle with, for a variety of reasons.

Some of these difficulties stem from a lack of conceptual understanding. Students memorise procedures, which then results in difficulties when they try to apply those procedures in problem-solving scenarios.

Rocky routines

With maths being sequential, a shallow level of understanding can make problem solving difficult at a higher level. Maths anxiety can further paralyse students' thinking, resulting in them struggling to think creatively when approaching the problem at hand.

Nor does it help that available classroom time for teaching problem solving techniques is typically quite limited, despite problem solving requiring a specific set of skills – such as working backwards, looking for patterns, making estimates and drawing diagrams.

Many students will be unfamiliar with such strategies and ways of approaching a problem, instead relying on routine methods that they're already familiar and comfortable with. But those familiar approaches won't always work, causing students to become stuck when faced with non-standard problems.

Room for improvement

Empowering your students to approach problems in a number of different ways could well be essential to improving their long-term outcomes. Time constraints notwithstanding, working through problem solving activities in the classroom can play a pivotal part in helping students apply abstract mathematical concepts to real life situations.

Take geometry, for example. When teaching students about area, perimeters and volume, you could perhaps ask them to design and furnish their own dream bedroom, taking account of carpet size, the room's dimensions and the various items of furniture, fixtures and gadgets they'll want to fill it with. This could be an effective means of introducing problem solving to them in a way that's both familiar and engaging.

We could then take this same problem and extend it further to stretch high ability learners. New considerations might include measuring the area of an L-shaped desk, the calculations needed to install built-in wardrobes or working out the angles of a loft conversion's slanted walls and ceilings.

Power fantasy

The even more abstract concepts of algebra and substitution can be explained to students with reference to video games. We can start by applying formulae and variables to the statistics of imaginary video game avatars, to help students grasp what these are and what they do.

By substituting our avatars' statistics to determine their power level (where 'power = 2*strength + 3*speed', for example) students get to see how substitution can be used to evaluate an expression when the value of the variables have been given.

Students can then be given different character cards with statistics that they need to substitute into a formula, before deciding which character has the highest power level. This introduces an interactive element, which will hopefully encourage students to engage more with their learning. We can then build in further complexity by adding multiple avatars with different, more complex formulae.

The physical, game-like nature of this activity should help make the abstract nature of the problem less daunting, and can potentially increase students' motivation and interest in an area that they might otherwise recoil from.

> *"Maths anxiety can paralyse students' thinking, resulting in them struggling to think creatively"*

Angles and inequalities

Trigonometry is another topic that can regularly present students with difficulties in problem-solving scenarios. Here, we could task students with applying SOH/CAH/TOA to the process of designing a water slide with an incline that will be enjoyable to use, whilst still being safe.

In this instance, basic trigonometry can help students to better visualise the problem they're being presented with. Allowing them to use cardboard, string and rulers to build a slide in the shape of a triangle, before physically measuring its angles and sides removes the abstractions of those missing lengths and angles. Interleaving this topic with numeracy can increase the level of complexity and encourage deeper thinking by making the cost of materials a factor in students' final designs.

We could also turn our attention to inequalities, which can similarly seem overly abstract to students. With the common misconception of writing inequality statements as equations, it's evident that students often don't understand inequality at a conceptual level.

We can address this by providing students with examples of inequalities being used in decision making, thus embedding concepts of inequalities that they can use when solving problems. We could revisit video games, by showing how a minimum score needed to unlock the next level is an example of an inequality in action.

Presenting problems that involve forming and solving inequalities to determine that minimum score can help to reduce the mistakes around inequality – particularly that of equal symbols being used interchangeably. This way, students can come to understand that the score doesn't have to be an exact amount for the level to become unlocked, but that it does have to reach a *minimum* amount.

Going viral

Unlikely as it seems, we could even turn to social media to help illustrate problems involving powers and roots. Let's say a video starts off with one view, but then starts to go viral, so that every day the number of views triples. Students can attempt to find out how many days it will take for the video to get a given number of views, or how many views the video will have after a set period of days.

Again, there's scope to turn this into a semi-practical activity by having students 'tag' one another in the classroom to represent the 'views' of the video increasing each day, with each person representing one additional 'view'. In this way, we're helping students to make inferences, draw on the prior knowledge they'll need to solve the problem and use strategies – such as working backwards, or finding patterns – to ultimately solve the problem.

Concrete activities of this kind can help students apply the concepts of a topic more effectively, while allowing them to explore the possibilities of how to solve a problem, trial various methods and create their own procedures in effort to find a solution.

Creative confidence

Through this process of discovery, the methods students end up using are more likely to stay with them than if they were simply passed on via direct instruction. Asking students to share sweets in a ratio as part of an activity, for instance – rather than asking them memorise what the process of sharing in a ratio involves – will do more to help them solve further problems within the topic and hone their skills through added challenge. Increasing the quantity of sweets, or requiring students to share them in, say, the exact same 3:2 ratio will encourage them to devise their own methods and approaches to solving the problem presented to them.

This adaptation could be vital in helping students access the processes of problem-solving and apply their knowledge to questions where previously, they might not have understood what was being asked of them.

New concepts always take time to learn and store in long-term memory. Concrete activities and real-life applications can help to reduce students' cognitive overload, boost their motivation, increase their confidence to think more creatively, and in time, help them become better problem solvers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ama Dickson is a maths teacher and contributor to Collins' series of maths revision guides; she also regularly posts maths instruction videos to TikTok as @mathscrunch

GCSE (9–1) Maths – the importance of accessibility

by OCR Maths Subject Advisors

In GCSE (9–1) Maths assessments, it's essential all students have every chance to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do. To achieve this, at OCR we ensure our questions are clear and easy for students to understand. In other words, that they are accessible.

An accessible assessment:

- is easy to understand, so students know what they are being asked to do,
- assesses only what it is intended to assess,
- is fair, as far as is reasonably possible, to all students.

We make continual improvements to our question papers and supporting materials to improve their accessibility. We constantly review new research, listen to your feedback and carry out our own research, to help make sure that no student is disadvantaged by not being able to access questions in our assessments.

We've developed a set of accessibility principles that inform how we write our question papers. They've been written in collaboration with relevant organisations such as BATOD (British Association of Teachers of the Deaf) and Colour Blind Awareness. You can read more about them in our GCSE (9–1) Maths 'Exploring our question papers' guide available from **ocr.org.uk/gcsemaths**, but several examples are below.

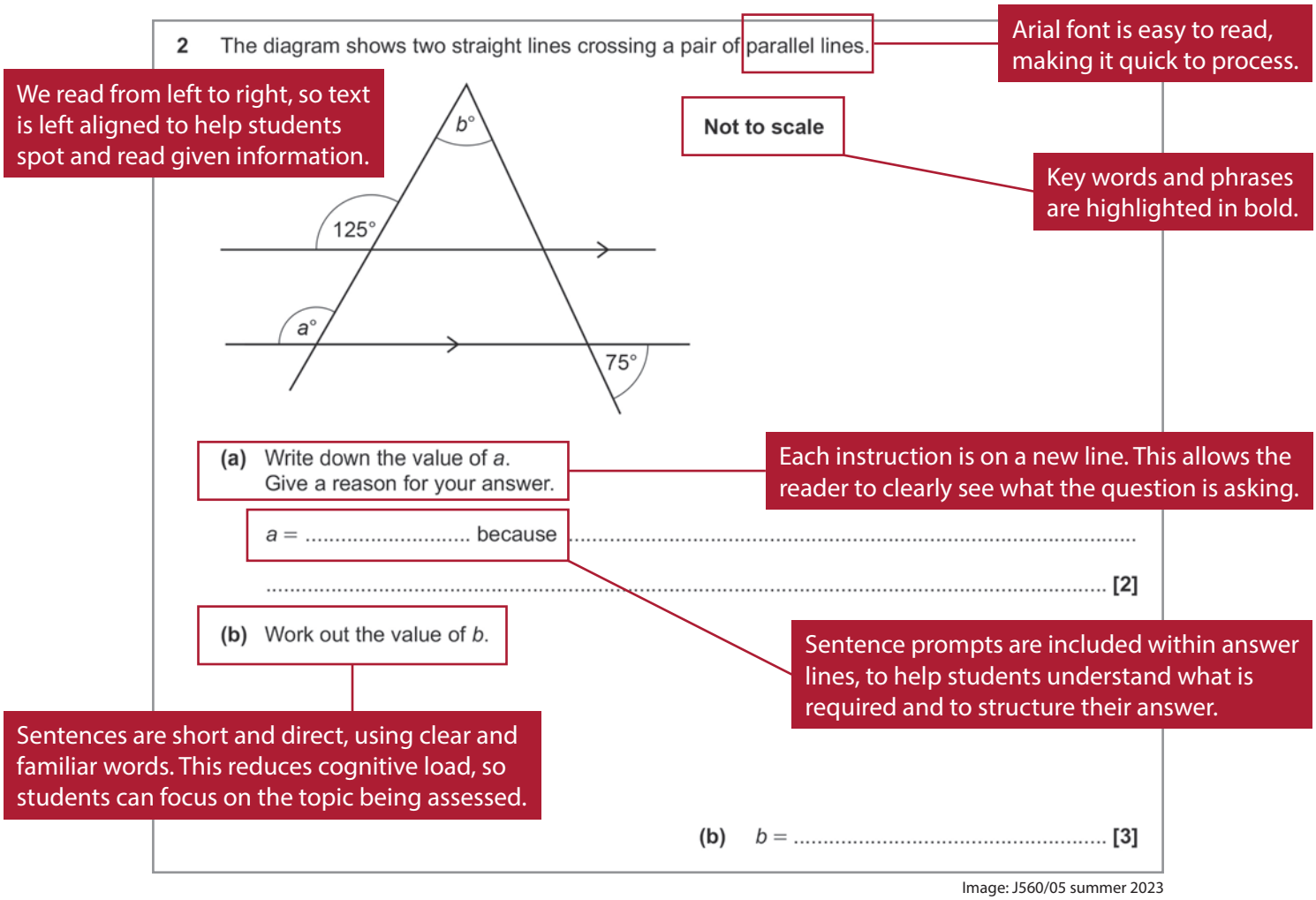


Image: J560/05 summer 2023

You can view our past papers at **ocr.org.uk/gcsemaths**, or to see the most recent papers speak to your exams officer about setting up a Teach Cambridge account.

To discover more about our GCSE (9–1) Maths qualification, go to **teach.ocr.org.uk/gcse-maths-for-all**

Q&A

Insights at your fingertips

Charlotte Clarke, Head of Product Management, Assessment at Hachette Learning, discusses how Boost Insights reports simplify your assessment data

30 SECOND BRIEFING

Boost Insights is Hachette Learning's assessment data analysis platform, built to provide schools with valuable insights into their learners' progress and attainment data. Put assessment at the heart of your teaching and make data-driven decisions.

What is Boost Insights?

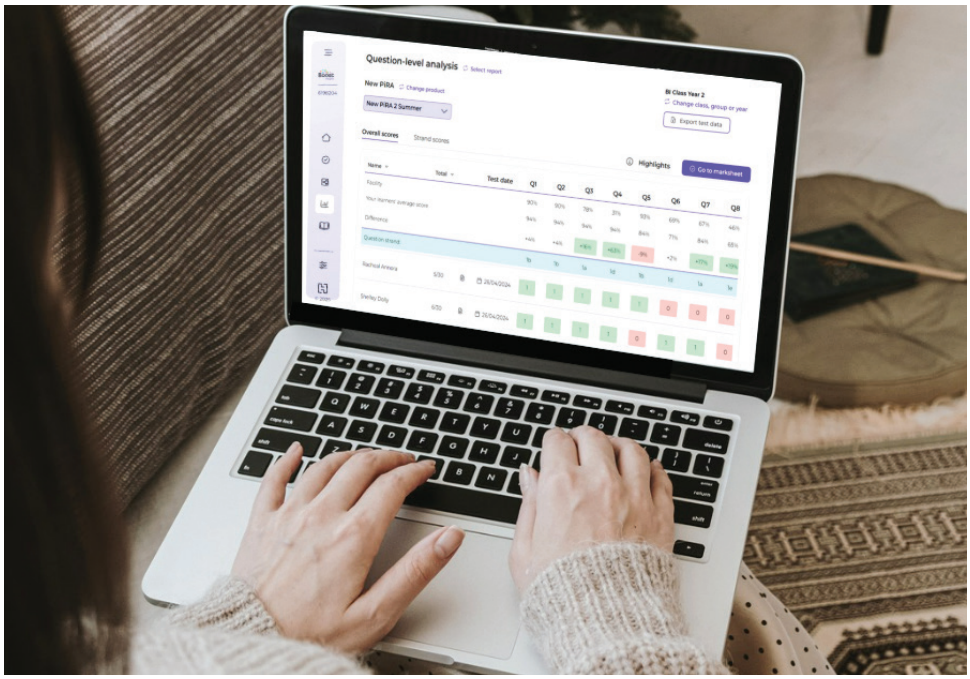
Boost Insights is the online assessment and reporting platform that comes with Hachette Learning's standardised assessments. Built with teachers, for teachers, we made sure the outcomes in Boost Insights provide actionable insights into your assessment data.

Access is available for all staff members when you use assessments from Hachette Learning: Access Reading Tests, Access Mathematics Tests, the Basic Number Screening Test or the Salford Sentence Reading and Comprehension Test.

How does it make identifying strengths and weaknesses easier?

The 'Question-level Analysis Report' can be run for groups, classes or whole year groups, presenting each learner's results for every question and strand in that test, as well your learners' average score.

The Group Report provides an easy summary of a group's average strand performance, making it easy to spot the areas in which your learners excel and where the group average needs support. The Individual Learner Reports also break down the strand performance of each learner to isolate areas of strength and inform targeted teaching.



hachette LEARNING

Contact:
01235 827 720 | education@hachette.co.uk | hachettelearning.com

Can I track progress?

Yes, effortlessly! As long as you have results for at least two tests, the Learner Progress Report can compare overall performance, changes in standardised score and strand performance across multiple tests. These are really helpful to share at staff meetings and parents evenings.

For larger groups or whole years, the Test Performance Comparison will calculate the difference between each learner's performance on one test and the next, while the Group Average Review provides an at-a-glance summary of changes.

ABOUT CHARLOTTE: Charlotte Clarke is Head of Product Management for Assessments at Hachette Learning

What metrics does it use?

A learner's raw assessment score is used to generate their standardised score, age-standardised score and attainment age (e.g. reading age, maths age); these can be easily compared against their actual age in the Age Comparison Report.

Access Reading and Mathematics Tests also use the Hodder Scale score – an additional independent measure which tracks small increments of progress across tests, regardless of the specific test or age of the learner.

What's the difference?

+ Boost Insights' reports are free with our assessments and generate instantly.
+ Sync Boost Insights with your chosen MIS to support whole-school data management.
+ We're constantly gathering teacher feedback to ensure our platform meets your needs.

Stop pedalling, START PADDLING

For some students, maths instruction can seem like a foreign language – but there is a way of making it make sense, says **Rebecca Ginger**

In maths lessons, there can sometimes be an obstacle that prevents certain students from grasping and retaining the fundamentals of the subject.

Children who struggle to fully understand the abstract nature of numbers early on may make some progress, but the impact on their learning by the time they get to KS4 will be considerable. It's similar to a language barrier, in that these children simply aren't able to absorb the content and language of their lessons as they need to.

Standing still

That was the case with me when I was at school. In every maths lesson, it felt like I was pedalling furiously underwater, just to reach the basic level. I'd sometimes come up with shortcuts for, say, multiplication, only to hit a wall when it came to number bonds.

I know the fear of maths that some children can have. I saw it in my own daughter, who experienced some of the same problems at school that I did. I know how much work these students have to put in, just to stand still.

To be clear, teachers do a brilliant job for most children. The issue is with those who get left behind, because we're currently seeing 47% of children getting 4s or lower in their maths GCSEs. That's nearly half the country.

Another way

When studying for my A Levels, I'd avoid the usual memorisation and revision methods, like making spider diagrams, as I could never commit them to memory. Instead, I found myself creating amusing poems with visual images to help me remember things.

When my daughter began experiencing similar issues to me with her maths schoolwork, I was told by her teachers that she'd never pass an exam in her life. I understood what she was going through, but also knew that there must be another way we could try.

At the time, I was working in television as a producer and director, which involves being given large volumes of information and turning that into a visual sequence that's intelligible to everyone. I sought to apply those skills to my daughter's learning, while reading up on the psychology of memory – what humans find easy to remember, for instance, and how religious texts have traditionally been passed down as stories.

The challenge was to adapt the material my daughter needed to learn into a format she could understand – and it worked. Turning numbers into characters, and maths instruction into stories, led to a transformation in her progress that saw her go from the bottom of her class to the top. After people started asking what I'd done, I continued to develop and refine the approach, research the area further and apply what I learned through tutoring sessions for the next five years.

Character studies

A team of researchers was once tasked with investigating why a hospital was seeing a rise in rates of infection. It turned out that staff weren't washing their hands properly. When the written instructions in staff preparation areas were swapped out for virtually text-free visual instructions that employed graphics and icons, those infection rates dropped dramatically.

That approach is similar to what we're doing now with the Fables World maths learning platform. We present numbers as characters – '7' is a boomerang, for example, '8' is a snowman – and imbue them with distinct personalities, which makes them easier to remember.

The platform is tailored for 4- to 14-year-olds; in secondary schools we're largely used by Y7s and Y8s in catch-up sessions. After just one hour of using the platform, these students suddenly realise that they can divide and multiply numbers; that it's not just them, that they're not stupid, and that they can actually do this. After that, their use of the platform will involve just a daily 5-minute login, typically for around 20 days, after which they'll no longer need to attend catch-up sessions.

Because once these students are given the right tools, they no longer feel scared. They understand what their maths teacher is telling them and want to keep going. My daughter, who would 'never pass an exam?' She eventually got an A star in A Level maths. She'd been drifting on a life raft – but when she was given a paddle, she was off.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Rebecca Ginger is the founder and CEO of Fables World; for more details, visit **fables.world**

Laying the FOUNDATIONS

If your Y7s are struggling when presented with the secondary maths curriculum, it may be a lack of foundational skills that's letting them down, advises **Paul Jenkins**...

To some degree, secondary teachers have always been faced with students who have limited skills when they arrive in Y7. The 2025/26 intake may encounter more challenges than previous cohorts, however, since they'll have missed a full year of the curriculum in Y1 and Y2, due to the COVID lockdowns.

This is a critical period, when foundational concepts are taught and consolidated, particularly in maths. So what can we expect, and what can we do about it?

The importance of number fluency

Ofsted has identified foundational skills as being key to success in secondary, since without these in place, teachers are essentially building on sand when it comes to teaching more difficult concepts. The priority for maths teachers thus becomes helping Y7 students who lack basic processes and understandings that should have been secured by the end of primary to catch up.

Just as schools have become more cognisant of how teaching reading fluency can improve reading comprehension, there's growing support in the maths community for teaching fluency in basic arithmetic, in order to provide the foundation for more complex mathematics later on.

Many teachers will be familiar with the sight of students in their class using their fingers to add or subtract. Others may use the longhand method of adding double digits together on paper, as it's safe and reliable – but neither of these calculation methods are particularly efficient, quick or fluent.

This lack of fluency impacts what comes next. A dysfluent student will put a disproportionate amount of time and thought into the underlying arithmetic, before reaching more complex operations. The outcome is that these students will have had insufficient practice at more advanced calculations – not because they aren't capable of doing them, but because the time they've wasted on low-level work has resulted in them failing to consolidate new learning effectively.

> **"Teachers are building on sand when it comes to teaching more difficult concepts"**

Lessons from primary

Breaking this cycle is challenging. Lower performing maths students will typically have low confidence in their mathematical skills already, meaning that a negative symbiotic relationship will encourage them to play it safe when learning their basic maths techniques.

This is the great challenge of developing maths fluency, because without fluency, the subsequent load on a student's working memory will erode their ability to hold on to the new maths skills they're learning – which in turn risks having a corrosive effect on *all* new knowledge they acquire, however well it's taught.

Teachers could teach them the same topic year after year, with the student still never quite getting to grips with it.

To get past this, secondary teachers should lean into the expertise of primary maths practitioners and build up the bravery to go 'back to basics' by teaching techniques that could supplement the lengthy, frequently labour-intensive approaches that struggling students will typically fall back on.

When secondary teachers identify that a student's fundamental skills are lacking, what they'll often do is perform work on their times tables in an effort to ensure that at least those are definitely secure.

Yet whilst this is the right starting point for some, there's perhaps an earlier intervention point which may well need to be addressed before that effective foundational learning can actually be delivered.

Working at speed

In the process of learning maths, a firm grasp of number is the absolute starting point. Almost all students will arrive at secondary understanding how to count and the relative size of numbers. The next phase of learning should involve additive and subtractive work, as for many struggling learners, this is when their overreliance on specific methods and gradual slowdown will start to take root. They can do some of what's needed, but not with fluency. This is where the most effective interventions will begin.

Fluency is, after all, about speed. As such, students will need opportunities for working at speed so that they can build up the pace of their calculations, and better appreciate the value of successfully identifying time-efficient study methods. This is what lies at the heart of becoming a fluent mathematician.

Most adults will have developed various maths strategies that they use each day – be it consciously or unconsciously – to perform mental calculations. Whether it's counting on, substitutions or adding 0, they're the patterns and simple techniques everyone uses to make numbers that little bit easier to juggle in our heads. For true fluency to become embedded, students will need to master a range of such techniques, along with the ability to match the best

techniques to the numbers they're presented with. This is what's core to making learners more fluent and flexible mathematicians.

Fluency in action

In their endeavour to ensure every single student achieves at least a grade 4 in GCSE maths, the Watford Grammar School for Girls adopted HFL Education's 'Making Fluent and Flexible Calculators' programme to address number fluency issues among their low attaining students.

According to Sue Harris, the school's head of maths, "*Since the changes to the maths curriculum were introduced, we've definitely seen students struggling more. We used to have a two-tier system, with students working towards either the higher or foundation GCSE maths papers, but we now have a three-tier system, as some students don't have the necessary skills or understanding to access the GCSE curriculum at all.*"

Maths teacher Emma Clay adds, "*COVID has definitely contributed to a decline in maths skills and knowledge for some students starting Y7. Studying primary maths on and off for two years, as it was for many children during the lockdowns, isn't enough to lay strong foundations. Maths relies on daily practice, and being able to shore up skills before moving on. That maths maturity and depth of knowledge is now missing in some of our students because of this.*"

The Making Fluent and Flexible Calculators programme was rolled out over a term to two bottom set maths classes, initially targeting 16 of the school's weakest Y7 students who had unsuccessfully tried other interventions before.

As Emma explains, "*We don't have data to quantify the improvements made, but as teachers who know our students and their abilities well, it was very clear to see that they have definitely become better at calculations. We can see they're using strategies more often to solve numerical problems, which they weren't before.*

"*Some of our students that struggle the most still count on their fingers. With this programme we're providing them with the skills to mentally complete calculations faster – but also understand how and why those calculations work, so that they can apply those same strategies to more complex problems.*

"*I've learned a lot about the teaching in primaries, which has enabled me to better support students transitioning into Y7.*"

IN SUMMARY

Secondary schools can meet the needs of struggling Y7 mathematicians by:

- Revisiting foundational skills to embed number fluency
- Securing different basic arithmetic techniques
- Banishing counting on fingers from the secondary maths classroom

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Jenkins is head of secondary curriculum services at HFL Education; the Making Fluent and Flexible Calculators programme is currently being trialled by the Educational Endowment Foundation in 120 state secondary schools – for more information and details of how to join the trials visit **tinyurl.com/ts145-FM1**

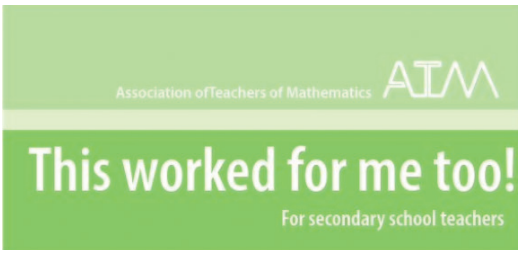
What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

1 Flexible, creative learning

From September 2025, Academy21 will be offering students the chance to study IGCSE Art and Design entirely online. With two live sessions a week, independent creative time and personalised feedback, this flexible course will suit students balancing mainstream or AP studies. Learners can include existing GCSE work (with teacher authentication), and complete the final exam online over several days under specialist invigilation.

Focusing on fine art and photography, the course supports creative growth and portfolio development. Want to find out more about how online art works? Explore the benefits of flexible, supportive learning with Academy21 by visiting **academy21.co.uk**

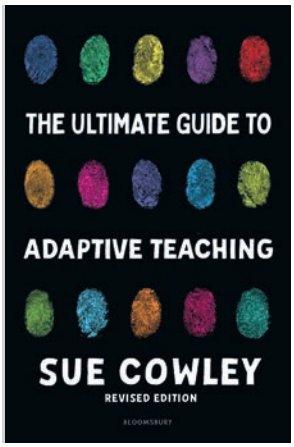


2 Will it work for you?

Building upon the success of its original *This Worked for Me* book, which was specifically tailored for teachers working with GCSE retake students, ATM is pleased to announce the imminent release of a new edition of this comprehensive guide, designed to support all teachers working with KS3/4 students.

Each chapter is authored by an experienced teacher who shares their insights, reflections and practical advice on those strategies, along with lessons and resources that have proven effective in their teaching practice. The new *This Worked for Me Too* will be available soon via the ATM website; email **admin@atm.org.uk** to register your interest.

3 Adaptive teaching made easier



The Ultimate Guide to Adaptive Teaching by Sue Cowley (Bloomsbury Education, £20 RRP) is your go-to book for creative, yet practical strategies for supporting every learner in your class. Now fully updated with a brand new chapter on why adaptive teaching matters, it covers planning, resources, learners, teaching and assessment – perfect for dipping into when you need some new ideas fast.

Whether you're working in early years, schools or further education, Sue's honest, no-nonsense style makes it easy to apply what works. With tips for supporting SEND, EAL and a range of other abilities, this fun, flexible guide will boost your confidence and help you meet the needs of every student in your classroom.

4 Refreshingly simple

Voyager School Travel is a specialist provider of immersive and educational school trips across Europe and beyond. With expert-led language residentials, curriculum-focused itineraries and its own accommodation, Voyager takes the stress out of trip planning. Its UK- and France-based teams support schools at every step – from bespoke itinerary design, to risk assessments and safety management. Trusted by thousands of UK schools, Voyager School Travel makes organising an enriching school trip refreshingly simple. To find out more, and to download its free Trip Leader Toolkit, visit **voyagerschooltravel.com**

5 Changing lives with art

At Curious Minds, we know that arts and culture have the power to change lives, and believe that every child deserves the chance to thrive through cultural education. We work across England as a trusted education sector partner, helping educators, artists and cultural leaders deliver high-quality arts and cultural learning experiences for children and young people. Our flagship programme, Leading the Arts in Your School, is a six-month CPD course tailored for early to mid-career teachers, with applications now open for the 2026/27 cohort. Through training, advocacy and collaboration, we work to ensure that voices are heard where it matters most. For more details, visit **curiousminds.org.uk**

6 Expert compliance support

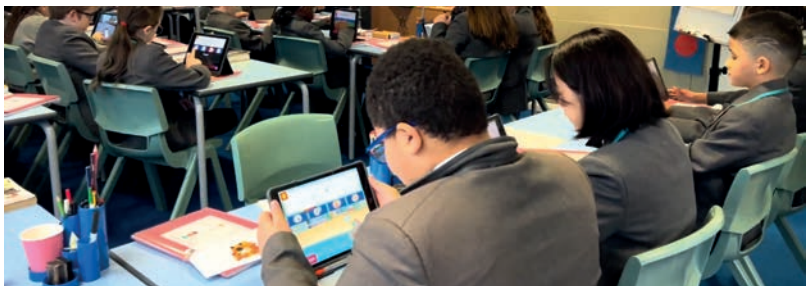
Navigating the complexities of legal and compliance requirements can be challenging for schools and trusts. Judicium Education has honed its educational expertise over 25 years, and can now ably provide accessible, high-quality support across key areas, including employment law & HR, payroll, safeguarding, data protection, health and safety, fire safety, facilities management, governance and clerking, and SEND Support.

Our flexible, wraparound model provides unlimited expert-led assistance within a clear, fixed-fee structure, thus ensuring value and predictability. By acting as an extension of your team, we can help you operate confidently and compliantly, so that you have the right support precisely when you need it. Discover more at **judiciumeducation.co.uk**.

Essential career skills

Rise brings together employers of all sizes across the UK, with the aim of improving social mobility by building students' confidence in, and appreciation of their own skills.

Delivered by expert facilitators, and supported by volunteers from partnered employers, Rise, in partnership with The Talent Foundry, offers free workshops to students at schools in areas of low social mobility UK-wide. These skills workshops link the KS3 and KS4 curriculum to the Skills Builder framework, and are designed to raise young people's career aspirations. For more information, visit **rise-initiative.co.uk**



8 Stress-free transitions

Sumdog is a game-based educational platform that helps students of all abilities master maths through fun, interactive and curriculum-aligned practice. By personalising questions to each learner's level, Sumdog builds confidence, boosts fluency and reinforces key skills in an inclusive and motivating environment.

Whether you're supporting intervention strategies, or looking to make maths more enjoyable, Sumdog can adapt to individual needs, making it an ideal tool for differentiated learning. It can serve as an effective catch-up resource for KS3 students – helping them revisit and solidify essential KS2 concepts in a playful, stress-free way – and is therefore perfect for easing the transition between primary and secondary education. For more information, visit **learn.sumdog.com**

9 Championing active futures

At YPO Sports, we believe every student deserves the chance to be active and inspired through physical activity. Our wide range of accessible PE and sports equipment – from leading brands, through to our affordable YPO product line – gives schools access to thousands of quality items to suit all needs and budgets.

Our commitment to championing physical activity extends beyond our products, in that we're proud to actively support the Brownlee Foundation – thus reinforcing our dedication to fostering a love for sports in every child. Explore more at **ypo.co.uk/sports**

10 Oracy essentials

The English-Speaking Union believes every child should be able to make their voice heard. We work with teachers to improve oracy skills and cross-cultural understanding so that all young people – regardless of background – can thrive.

Our resources, programmes and competitions help young people to better engage with the world, speak more confidently, listen attentively and understand different points of view. Acquiring these skills will improve young people's standards of attainment, emotional intelligence and social skills, helping them live their lives to the fullest.

To find out more, visit **ESU.org** or email **education@esu.org**

Seeing the light

Andy McHugh explains why religious education still matters in an increasingly secular society

RE is probably the most important subject you can study at school. A bold claim? Perhaps, but I'd argue that it explores the one thing that every other subject merely touches upon – the profound questions that truly matter most in life.

Let's start with the numbers. According to the 2021 Census for England and Wales, almost 4 in 10 people said they had no religion. Just 46% of the population now identify as Christian, continuing a steady decline that's been happening for decades.

On the face of it, then, RE looks increasingly irrelevant, doesn't it? Why study religion in a world where more and more people say they're not religious at all? Yet I'd argue that, in fact, the opposite is true. It's precisely *because* we're living in a more secular society that the study of RE is more essential than ever.

Human pursuits

It goes without saying that STEM subjects matter. The demand is everywhere. A quick scroll through any job site will turn up hundreds of listings for software engineers, data analysts, developers and scientists. There's no doubt in my mind that STEM experts will shape the future, as technology continues to be ever more central to the way we live, work and relate to each other.

And then there's the arts. With AI creeping ever further into creative spaces, it's becoming increasingly clear that truly human creativity will, in the years ahead, become an ever more rare and precious thing. Art, music and dance are all deeply 'human' pursuits. You can generate a decent image with an algorithm, sure – but fall in love with it? That's a different story. We ignore the arts at our peril.

But here's the thing – RE sits above both arts and sciences. Not in a competitive sense, but in terms of what it does. I'm not speaking from a place of religious conviction here, either. I'm talking about the heart of high quality RE teaching (by which I do mean *high quality*).

STEM and arts subjects (only) teach us about the world around us; RE goes further, by teaching us about ourselves.

Space for the 'why'

Our education system, quite rightly, tends to be heavily focused on questions of 'how'. That's what most GCSE papers ask for – *how* something works, *how* to analyse data, *how* to solve a problem. RE, on the other hand, holds space for the 'why'. *Why* do people believe what they do? *Why* does any of this matter? *Why* are we here at all?

It's one thing to teach students how Hindus worship. It's quite another to explore why they choose to worship in the first place. We can explain the Big Bang and the evolution of the universe, but RE goes beyond that to ask '*Why is there something, rather than nothing?*'. We can teach young people how to write a personal statement, or ace a job interview, but what about asking why we feel 'called' to perform certain jobs in the first place?

These 'why' questions matter. They're not just philosophical distractions. They go right to the core of what it means to be human. And the beauty of RE is that it opens these questions up to everyone.

> **"RE isn't about converting people – it's about helping them understand themselves and their place in the world"**

It's one of the few subjects that is, by default, relevant to every student in the room. Even if they've never set foot in a church, mosque or temple, they'll still have wrestled with questions of purpose, morality and identity.

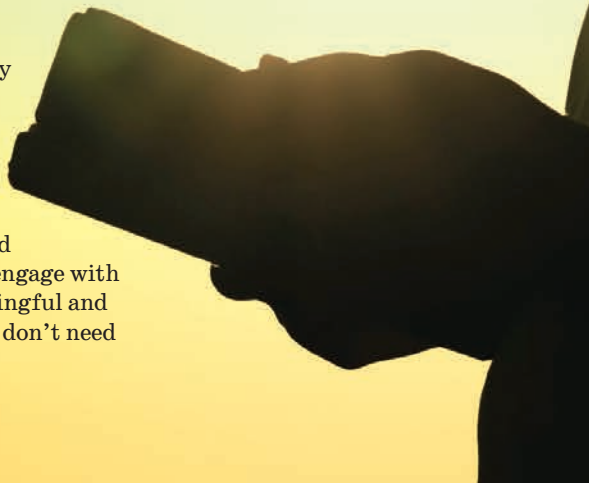
The big, open questions we explore in RE allow students of all abilities and backgrounds to engage with something meaningful and worthwhile. You don't need to be a walking encyclopaedia of scripture. What you need is curiosity and a willingness to think.

What grades can't do

None of this is to say that RE isn't academic. It absolutely can be, and often is, but its success isn't limited to exam grades. A student might leave an RE lesson without a perfectly written essay, but with a head full of thoughts about free will, the nature of good and evil or how to live ethically. That kind of thinking makes students more useful to themselves, their classmates and to society at large.

Great RE can do what a grade sometimes can't. It can build confidence and shape how a student navigates the world. It can help them make better decisions, or think more deeply about their personal relationships, fairness and justice. Whether they come to believe in God or not isn't the point. RE isn't about converting people – it's about helping them understand themselves and their place in the world.

That's why I teach RE. I don't call it 'compulsory', any more than I'd call breathing compulsory. I call it essential. Vital, even.



Modern-day 'worship'

All of us engage in RE every day without even realising it. Whether we have a faith or not, we live lives full of purpose, ethics and traditions. We make moral decisions. We weigh up right and wrong. We look at how other people live and compare their lives to our own. We borrow ideas and customs from different cultures and beliefs and make them ours.

And let's not forget our modern obsession with celebrities and public figures. Look at how we idolise sports stars, influencers, politicians and performers. The time we spend scrolling through their lives on social media borders on religious devotion, doesn't it? What other subject is better placed than RE to help us make sense of this kind of modern-day 'worship'?

Consider also the ways in which technology is reshaping our world. AI systems are writing essays, creating art and even holding philosophical conversations. In this rapidly evolving landscape, understanding what makes us distinctly human becomes more crucial than ever. RE gives us the tools to explore those boundaries, and ask the deeper questions about consciousness, purpose and meaning that technology raises, but isn't able to answer.

The truth is, everyone thinks about the big stuff, whether they admit it or not. We wonder what our purpose is. We grapple with thoughts of whether there's more to life than this. We face new ethical dilemmas all the time, especially in today's complex world. RE helps us navigate all of it. It doesn't always give us the answers – but it does help us ask better questions.

Other subjects can teach us how the world works, or how to get on in life, but RE is the only one that asks us to consider why any of it matters at all. And that's exactly why we need it now, more than ever.

TALKING POINTS

RE shouldn't just involve learning about religion – it's about learning from it, too. Here are just some of the topics that students love debating:

1. Is it ever right to break the law?
Explores the tensions that exist between legal and moral responsibility, civil disobedience and ethical principles.

2. Are all beliefs equally valid?
Encourages evaluation of cultural relativism, tolerance and the limits of pluralism.

3. What makes someone a 'good' person?
Links to virtue ethics, character education and personal development.

4. Do science and religion really conflict?
Engages students in nuanced thinking about different kinds of truth and evidence.

5. Is religion a force for good or harm?
Prompts analysis of religion's role in history, politics and peace-building.

6. Can people be spiritual without being religious?
Encourages reflection on identity, belief and secular spirituality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Andy McHugh (@andymchugh.bsky.social) is a head of RE and the founder of Teacher Writers (@teacherwriters.bsky.social) – a service that supports teachers wanting to write professionally or just for fun

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[MATHS PROBLEM]

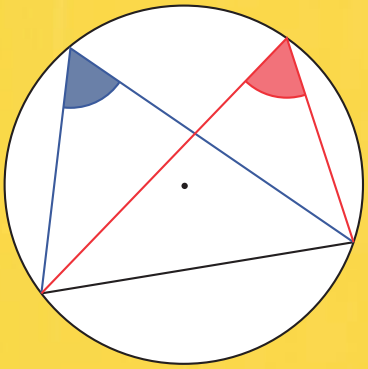
ANGLES IN THE SAME SEGMENT

Students are often unsure why angles in the same segment of a circle have to be equal, says Colin Foster

In this lesson, students explore the relationship between the angle at the circumference, and the angle at the centre of a circle.

THE DIFFICULTY

Anil says that the two angles shown in the figure below are equal.

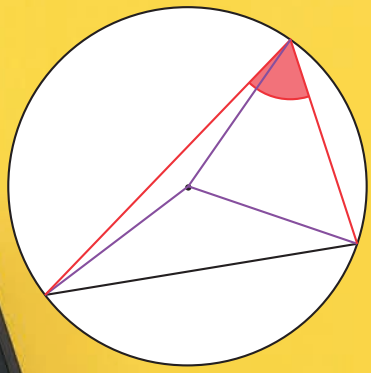


Do you agree? Why / why not?

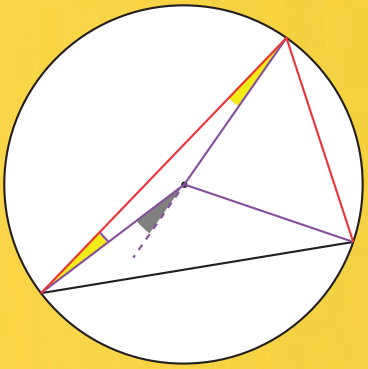
Students may agree with Anil by quoting the theorem that 'the angles in the same segment are equal'. This is good application of a theorem, but they may struggle to explain ***why*** the theorem is true.

THE SOLUTION

Let's just think about the red triangle for now. A good strategy with circle problems is to draw in radii, which I've done in purple here.

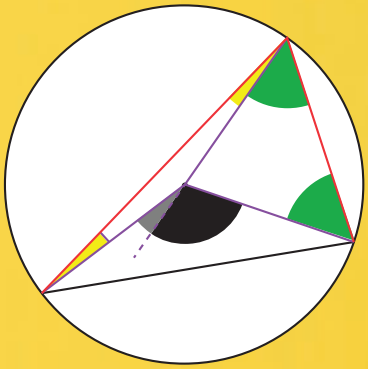


Now I'm going to colour some angles yellow.



What can you say about the yellow angles?

They are equal to each other, because they are the base angles in an isosceles triangle (the purple radii are all of equal length, because they are radii of the same circle). Also, the grey angle must be the ***sum*** of the yellow angles, because it is the exterior angle of the triangle that contains them.



Now let's do the same thing with the green angles here.

This time, the two equal green angles must add up to the black angle. This means that the grey and black angles together are equal to twice one yellow and one green, and that shows that the angle at the centre is twice the angle at the circumference.

Checking for understanding

What would happen if you did the same thing for the blue triangle instead?

Although the blue triangle is different from the red one, exactly the same process would lead to the blue angle also being half of the grey-and-black angle. This means that the blue angle and the red angle must be equal to each other. And so must any angle in the same segment as them.

Colin Foster (**@colinfoster77**) is a Reader in Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University, and has written many books and articles for teachers; find out more at **foster77.co.uk**

TWICE EXCEPTIONAL

Alice Guile writes of the considerations to bear in mind when supporting gifted students with SEND

Some of the world's greatest geniuses passed through school with their talent largely, or entirely unnoticed. In his book *The Element*, Sir Ken Robinson recounted a conversation with Sir Paul McCartney, during which the songwriter described how he'd hated music at school, and how his teacher failed to notice the talent he possessed.

He went on to note that the same teacher had also taught George Harrison. This music teacher had *half of the Beatles as his students*, and yet failed recognise that both were anything out of the ordinary. Robinson uses McCartney's experience to argue his point that exceptional talent is often deeply buried, and that you have to go looking for it.

A minimum standard

What's interesting is how often there seems to be a correlation between genius and what we might class as SEN. Indeed, many people widely considered to be geniuses – including Sir Issac Newton, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso and Leonardo Da Vinci – are recorded as having possessed traits that modern psychologists would consider indicative of neurodiversity. One could reasonably argue that some neurodiverse traits, such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia, are overrepresented among the world's most gifted people.

This could be because neurodiverse people think differently – something usually seen as fairly important for the 'genius' description to apply. Having a learning difference or some form of SEN, while also being evidently gifted could therefore perhaps be described as being 'twice exceptional'.

One reason as to why some exceptionally talented people may go unnoticed by their teachers is that the mainstream education system is currently set up to get as many students as possible reaching a minimum standard – one generally geared towards the needs of neurotypical young people.

"It's in everybody's interest for our most promising young people to be ably supported"

Yes, all schools are required to provide for educationally underachieving SEN children – but if the purpose of education is to help young people to reach their full potential, then students whose educational achievement is average or slightly above average, while being gifted in certain areas, are still effectively underachieving. If, on the other hand, the purpose of education is to *pass exams*, then these students' progress will be seen as adequate.

For schools that see their purpose as being to help young people reach their full potential, it's imperative that gifted students are appropriately supported – and that the abilities of twice exceptional students be supported equally.

Be direct

I myself am twice exceptional. When I was in Y12, my sixth form was given the opportunity to set its students a Mensa exam. I scored 157 and was duly admitted to Mensa. This was around the time I was diagnosed with ADHD, and I've long been fairly certain that I am autistic, based on certain traits that I possess, and the views of a number of people, including colleagues.

The correlation between ADHD and autism is notably high. When one of your 12-year-old pupils sits beside you, and discreetly asks you if you are autistic – as once happened to me – it does make you think.

This may have been down to how I was presenting his class with a long-running story each lesson, in which the pupils had all been assigned characters while they worked on their art, perhaps marking me out as 'different' to the other teachers. Curious as to why he'd asked me that question, he said "*We think some of our teachers could be autistic.*"

At the time, there was a student in another class who was openly autistic and behaved differently. The students in my Y7 art class, who knew that boy well, evidently concluded that people who behave differently might do so because they're autistic, and that this group could well include their teachers.

Some of the students asked me for advice on how to interact with the boy, explaining that they were trying to be friends with him, but that he wasn't understanding their hints – which was perhaps to be expected, given how some people with autism can struggle with social cues. I explained to them that they needed to be very direct.

Masking alone

Looking back, my Y7 questioner was probably on to something. While I coped with the demands of school, I believe my life would have been far less stressful had my own SEN been recognised. My constant daydreaming, scattiness and inability to organise myself were traits I had attempted to mask and ended up coping with alone.

A huge stumbling block for people requiring SEN support can be the persistent belief that some still hold that people with SEN are somehow 'less intelligent' than average. As an adult, I once encountered my former Spanish teacher in the supermarket. Our chat turned to the problems I was having with focussing in class, and my suspicion that they were due to ADHD and SEN that had been undiagnosed back when I was a student. "*You can't be SEN – you're too intelligent!*" came his reply.

How, then, on a practical level, can schools support their gifted SEN students? Firstly, I believe that the government's 'Young, Gifted and Talented' program, which launched in 2002 before being closed in 2010, should be brought back. Cutting the program may have saved money in the short term, but I contend that the denial of opportunities to gifted young people following its closure will have proved more expensive in the long term, seeing as how gifted young people so often become the innovators of the future. People with ADHD, for example, are 300% more likely to start a business.

There's also currently no national definition for exceptionally talented students, beyond 'More Able'. This needs to change. I further believe that every school should have a gifted and talented co-ordinator who is trained in nurturing exceptional talent, and able to help other teachers spot signs of neurodiversity among gifted students who may be masking their difficulties to fit in. This is especially important for bright, female students with SEN, due to this group often being better at masking symptoms in order to appear neurotypical compared to their male peers. It's not uncommon for bright female SEN students to proceed through school largely unnoticed, while just about coping, only to flounder once they reach university, due to the relative lack of structure. I certainly found this to be true of myself – I managed to earn a degree, but not without some some considerable difficulties along the way.

A pleasant fantasy

Those young people who appear to be coping? Often, they won't be – they'll be masking. That makes it incredibly important that these students be identified and given appropriate support to develop coping strategies with which to manage their SEN requirements – such as organisational strategies for students with ADHD.

I'm aware that what I'm suggesting here will require funding, and that the notion of appointing a gifted and talented co-ordinator in every school will only ever be a pleasant fantasy without the money to pay for it.

I hope, however, that raising awareness of the issue might at least contribute to it being taken up as a valid concern by the unions, who could potentially campaign for the reinstatement of Gifted and Talented funding or a comparable equivalent. After all, it's in everybody's interest for our most promising young people to be ably supported – because one day, their ideas might change the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Alice Guile is a secondary school art teacher

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From consumers TO CREATORS

John Bolton considers what it takes to teach students computing with a sense of creative purpose

With algorithms and coding currently occupying around one third of the GCSE computing curriculum, it's easy to assume that the subject is a largely technical one. Yet the real purpose of computing *should* be to teach students how to think critically about the digital world – to unpick how technology is designed, and to ultimately become creators, rather than consumers.

In a creative computing classroom, students will be learning about far more than 'just' coding. They'll be learning deeply about how things function, how problems are solved, and what makes certain approaches and processes successful.

Everything is intentional

Of course, this doesn't mean that the technical aspects of the subject are sidelined completely. Students will indeed need to learn about algorithms and coding, computer hardware and data structures – but at the same time, we should be aiming for a higher purpose. We should teach students how to identify needs, and how to create meaningful solutions.

Take Microsoft Office, for example. We're all familiar with its ribbon layout – but how many of us realise that every aspect of that interface is the result of years of research by behavioural psychologists, user experience designers, and data analysts? From where the buttons are positioned, to the number of pixels between them, every last detail is fully intentional.

If we teach students to understand that interface construction is a deliberate, research-driven process, they can begin to see software differently. More importantly, they start to question and analyse – skills that are fundamental not just in computing, but right across the curriculum.

Learning from failure

Of course, even with expert design, things can go wrong. As well as unpicking the successes, we should also teach students about digital failures. Google+ was an attempt by the search engine giant to offer a social media platform that could rival the then market leaders Facebook and Twitter, but it arrived in 2011, after both platforms had already become well established.

It had some nifty features, but these didn't offer a compelling enough reason to switch. Many of its tools and functions were things people either didn't need, or could already get elsewhere. It was a textbook example of an answer to a question no one had asked. Its design was complicated, it lacked a USP and it was never really clear who it was aimed at.

Analysing the failure of Google+ shows students that even powerful companies can sometimes get it wrong. It also teaches them that success as a software developer hinges on not just being clever at coding, but also on taking the time to understand your users.

Demystify the technology

Creative computing assignments should begin with a question. Why is TikTok's infinite scroll so addictive? Who benefits from features like voice control or dark mode? Why does Google's homepage feature so few visual elements? What went wrong with platforms like Vine – or going further back, MySpace? During lockdown, why did people opt to use Zoom over Skype?

To ask those sorts of questions, we have to first demystify the technology we use every day. Students tend to see apps and websites as finished products. We need to lift the lid on them, and reveal the long process of development they will have undergone before getting to that stage. Planning, research, design, coding, testing – all done by ordinary people, performing real-world jobs. Jobs that students may one day be engaged in themselves.

We live in a world now saturated with apps and online services, and yet most of us will habitually use them while giving barely any thought as to how they came into being. We swipe, click, scroll and scrub, but rarely will we stop and think, '*What problem does this app actually solve? Why does it look and behave the way it does? In what ways could it be improved?*'

That's the heart of computing. As educators, we should be shifting the mindset. We need our students to become designers, engineers and problem solvers. Because the last thing the world needs is another Google+.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
John Bolton is a primary and secondary school teacher, and former freelance education writer

LEARNING LAB

IN THIS ISSUE

+ Why your students need lessons in digital resilience
+ Could your classes benefit from the '100% rule'?
+ The 'freedom of speech' issue in schools that's going largely unnoticed
+ Why your support for students with dyslexia ought to extend further than coloured overlays
+ What's stopping science teachers from delivering practical science lessons?
+ How the experience of creating a memorial garden helped one group of students bring their community together
+ 5 ways to address students' needs without differentiation

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Thinking about ...

NATURE POETRY

Young people today are increasingly disconnected from nature. They're spending more time indoors, and less time enjoying being outside. which can affect their wellbeing and limit their understanding of the environment and the climate crisis.

Nature poetry offers a powerful way of bridging this gap, as it encourages young readers to tune into their senses, focus on the present moment and explore their emotions. Through vivid imagery and rhythm, nature poetry can evoke the beauty and fragility of our planet, and in turn, help children to appreciate the natural world. It also provides a creative and emotional space in which to explore the urgency of climate change in a deeply personal way.

Taking students outside presents them with a chance to pause and reconnect with the world around them. Sitting quietly, they can closely observe and record what they notice through each of their senses – a gentle wellbeing exercise that encourages calm, focus and emotional awareness.

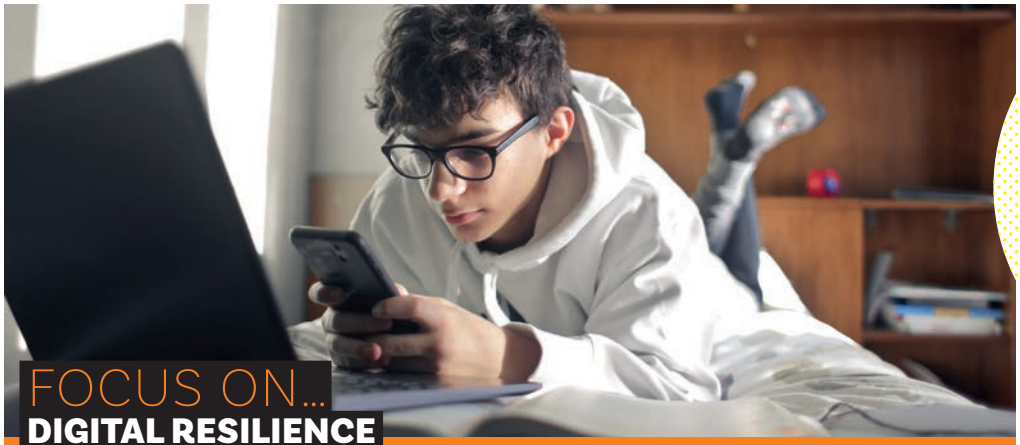
Back in the classroom, students can then use their sensory notes as the foundation for descriptive poems that capture the essence of their outdoor experience, thus sparking their creativity while fostering an appreciation for the environment. (Example poems – 'Wind' by Ted Hughes; 'Death of a Naturalist' by Seamus Heaney.)

Nature poetry also let students empathise and connect with the natural world. One effective approach can be to have them choose an aspect of nature currently under threat, such as the Great Barrier Reef, a melting glacier, or an endangered animal. After researching its features, habitat and the challenges it faces, they can give this natural entity a voice using poetry. Writing in the first person, the chosen subject could reflect on its past, express its fears and plead for help. This exercise deepens understanding, encourages compassion and empowers students to engage creatively with real-world environmental issues. (Example poems: 'Extinct' by Mandy Coe; 'Song for the Woolly Mammoth' by Lauren Moseley.)

To help students truly understand the degradation of our planet, teachers can use 'before and after' photographs of, for example, deforested areas, polluted rivers or melting ice caps. Examining the contrasts between these thriving 'before' and damaged 'after' images, students can reflect on what was lost and then write a two-part poem. The first stanza should try to capture the beauty, life and vibrancy of the untouched environment, while the second explores the subsequent destruction, absence or silence. This approach fosters empathy, critical thinking, and emotional engagement with environmental issues. (Example poems: 'The Greenhouse Effect' by Carl Dennis; 'The Purpose of the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal' by Dave Smith.)

At a time when many are growing up detached from nature, poetry can encourage mindfulness, strengthen language skills and give young people a voice with which to express their concerns and hopes. Through rhythm, imagery and reflection, nature poetry will help students to both see the world more clearly and care for it more deeply.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Jessica De Waal is a school leader, PhD graduate and freelance writer exploring environmental literature, ecocriticism and educational issues



FOCUS ON... DIGITAL RESILIENCE

Online experiences can be positive or negative – but also often complex, and challenging for school staff to manage. At Anna Freud – a mental health charity for children and young people – we support schools in becoming more mentally healthy through the provision of clinical support, resources and training. This includes helping school staff to understand, navigate and manage the emotional impact of the time students spend online. Because by intervening early, school staff will be well placed to help build resilience in young people, giving them the tools to face challenges online that can spill over into the real world. Here's what can help.

Listen carefully

School staff often tell us that they worry their own lack of technological understanding is a barrier to supporting students experiencing issues online, but you can make a meaningful difference without being a tech expert.

When something has gone wrong online for a student, a common pitfall can be to blame them – to say they 'should have known better', for example. The most important thing is to *listen carefully* and *reserve judgement*. Responding with empathy and validation can encourage students to speak more openly and stay safe, while also potentially negating long-term impacts on their mental health.

That said, it can also help to set up peer support groups to keep pace with emerging digital trends. Older students are more likely to be aware of important safety issues across various social media and gaming channels than adults, and can thus provide valuable advice and support regarding specific platforms.

Conduct open conversations

Young people have told us that when they discuss their lives online, it's easier for them to reflect on the experiences and behaviours of others. So, rather than planning open classroom discussions, bring concrete examples for students to consider.

Take cyberbullying, which school staff tell us is one of their biggest day-to-day concerns. It's a valuable topic to explore, and can take many forms – such as the sending of hurtful or discriminatory messages, or reposting of private images. Large groups can sometimes be involved, made up of individuals actively mocking or attacking someone, as well as bystanders.

Asking students to analyse such situations from a distance can help them better understand the impact of their actions (or inaction). They may come to realise how witnessing bullying can be perceived as complicity by victims, and explore how the apparent anonymity of digital spaces can foster nastiness.

Promote positive internet use

Online experiences can be helpful as well as harmful. Research has highlighted significant benefits to being online for certain groups, including LGBTQIA+ young people, such as the ability to create and join communities where members support each other. However, it's important to remember that marginalised (and often vulnerable) groups are at greater risk of being targeted by online abusers.

PHSE and RSHE lessons can be good settings for nuanced discussion around the dangers and opportunities presented by online spaces. Raising awareness of how algorithms work can help students search out and discover more reassuring and affirming content, while blocking anything they find upsetting or disempowering.

Working with parents and carers is important too. Encouraging them to negotiate and agree boundaries around device use with their child, and review privacy settings together, can build trust and ultimately help to keep young people safe.

ROISIN MCEVOY IS HEAD OF SCHOOLS TRAINING AT ANNA FREUD; FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHARITY'S 'DIGITAL RESILIENCE: GROWING UP ONLINE' TRAINING FOR SCHOOL STAFF AND ITS FREE 'SCHOOLS IN MIND' NETWORK FOR EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS, VISIT ANNAFREUD.ORG

DO THIS

THE 100% RULE

EXERCISE BETTER CLASS CONTROL WITH THESE TIPS FROM ROBIN LAUNDER..

You want 100% of your students working 100% of the time with 100% commitment. That's the 100% rule. The closer you are to hitting this target, the less misbehaviour you'll have – and here's why.

The 100% rule reduces opportunities for misbehaviour. If there's a student wanting to misbehave, but everyone around them is working at full tilt, then there's no one for that student to misbehave with. Misbehaviour likes company. Human beings are social animals, and tend to do what others around them are doing already. If most students are working hard, that pulls on the less hard-working students to join them.

This can in turn lead to student progress – and rapid progress, at that. Students making progress get to experience a lovely, dopamine-induced glow of increased mastery. If they want to have that feeling again – and they will – then they'll have to work hard for it.

Moreover, the 100% rule teaches students that working hard is the expectation in your classroom. If you're unrelenting in your pursuit of the 100% rule, then over time, working hard will become the default collective habit of all your students.

Robin Launder is a behaviour management consultant and speaker; find more tips in his weekly Better Behaviour online course – for more details, visit behaviourbuddy.co.uk

86%

of educators state that the pandemic continues to negatively impact pupil achievement

Source: Survey of approximately 9,000 teachers, middle leaders, SLT and headteachers by ParentPay Group

An increasingly popular view in recent years has been that anti-racist activism and other progressive movements have had a chilling effect on freedom of speech in education settings. A new research project undertaken at the University of Birmingham, however, has examined the issue differently.

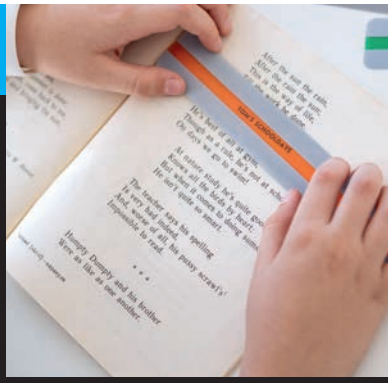
As Karl Kitching, a professor of public education who co-led the project, explains, *"Support for child and youth 'free speech' is in principle part of education policy in England's schools, yet no study has directly enquired into how expression for young people is formed, enabled, and limited through the school system. Our study was designed to address this gap."*

Based on extensive interviews with national and local policymakers, lesson observations and survey work (encompassing 3,156 Y10 students and 214 teachers), the study (see tiny.cc/ts145-LL1) found that young people in a racial or religious minority at their school were often inclined to not discuss their experiences of discrimination, or wider social and political views with their teachers. Black and Asian young people were also '2.5 times more likely' to disagree that the histories of people sharing their racial or ethnic background were being taught accurately at their school.

According to co-lead Reza Gholami, professor of sociology of education, *"Our findings refute the idea that these issues are taught about in ideologically charged ways that prevent people from expressing their opinions..we found that schools that do not talk about these issues are less likely to have teachers who present several sides of an issue or listen to young people."*

CLOSE-UP ON...

THE OVERLAYS MYTH



If coloured overlays were a cure for dyslexia, we'd be stockpiling acetates instead of adapting teaching.

It's a comforting idea that a simple colour adjustment can clear up reading difficulties – but this glosses over the black-and-white truth that dyslexia is primarily an issue of auditory and memory processing, not visual perception. Clinging to the overlay myth risks distracting us from what pupils actually need.

ARE OVERLAYS DAMAGING?

Before the overlay defenders stage an intervention, let me be clear. Coloured overlays and pastel paper *can* genuinely help students who experience visual instability (also known as visual stress). This is not about acuity – indeed, some within this group may have 20/20 vision – but rather how the eyes behave. These pupils will often describe words that run like rivers across the page. It's a valid and very real experience, and one best discussed with an optometrist.

Moreover, pastel backgrounds on paper, screens, displays and, yes, overlays, often can help. At the very least, they'll certainly do no harm. The problems arise when we describe such measures as a '*dyslexia intervention*'.

If you know, or suspect that a student has dyslexia, then overlays are unlikely to make a meaningful difference for them. What can cause harm is assuming their needs are being met by coloured paper, rather by addressing the core difficulties typically found within someone's auditory processing and working memory.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO INSTEAD?

Small tweaks to teaching can be transformational for students with dyslexia, especially when they reduce pressure on working memory (which we use to briefly store information when processing it in order to perform a task). Think of it as a Post-It note – something that's fragile, and not intended to store large volumes of information for prolonged periods. If our working memory capacity is reduced – as it often can be, due to dyslexia and other types of neurodivergence – then the more auditory information you're asked to hold in your mind, the more vulnerable that information is going to be.

As teachers, our challenge is to reduce this load. Students with dyslexia will often benefit from visual support for their verbally expressed ideas, concise and meaningful captions, and well-organised information that's personally engaging (since we know that memory works best when information is made personal). They need bite-sized chunks, not information overload.

Boring or dry information can be turned into actions or characters. Use visuals, sound and video clips as stand-ins for that mental Post-it that keeps flying away. Build in time to think, talk and review, and explicitly teach how to take meaningful and useful notes.

SO – DO OVERLAYS REALLY WORK?

It can be hard to shift your mindset. If you've always used overlays with dyslexic pupils, then you might have found that they do make a difference.

I can promise you this, however – that if you direct your energy towards strategies aimed at supporting working memory, then you won't just be helping your dyslexic learners. You'll benefit every student in the room.

LOUISE SELBY HAS WORKED IN SEND FOR 25 YEARS, AND IS PRESENTLY A FREELANCE SPECIALIST TEACHER, ASSESSOR, TRAINER AND CONSULTANT, AS WELL AS AUTHOR OF THE BOOKS *MORPH MASTERY* AND *ALL ABOUT DYSLEXIA*

39%

of students internationally are unclear as to their career expectations – double the proportion from just under a decade ago

Source: OECD study of 690,000 teens across 81 countries

Need to know

National Curriculum demands may be stymieing science teachers' ability to deliver practical lessons. That's the conclusion of a briefing issued by EngineeringUK, which gathered survey responses from 800 STEM teachers across the UK, who indicated that the main constraints on delivering successful practical lessons came from curriculum demands (cited as the biggest barrier by 44%), time constraints (cited by 37%) and student behaviour (cited by 33%). 27% meanwhile pointed to their school lacking the financial resources needed to purchase appropriate science equipment.

According to the 'School report: Barriers to practical science,' briefing, 2016 saw 44% of GCSE students performing hands-on practical work in lessons at least once per fortnight. By 2019, this proportion had declined to 37%, and fell to just 26% in 2023. The briefing's authors acknowledge that COVID restrictions were a contributing factor, but also note that shifts towards teacher-led demonstrations and video learning were already well underway prior to the pandemic.

The briefing's recommendations include addressing the issue of 'content overload' as part of the government's ongoing curriculum and assessment review; making practical science a curriculum requirement; and ensuring schools receive the resources needed to provide students with regular practical learning opportunities within the sciences.

WHAT WE MADE

A MEMORIAL GARDEN

What began for us as a simple extracurricular activity soon evolved into a remarkable journey, spanning history, art and horticulture – all the way to Westminster, and one of the UK's most celebrated gardening events.

In 2022, our history department joined a national initiative called 'The Holocaust, Their Family, Me and Us', inspired by a BBC documentary hosted by Robert Rinder. At the time, we couldn't have imagined the incredible doors this project would open for our students, the skills they'd uncover, or the path that would eventually lead them from a school club to a national platform.

Thus began the 'History Research Group' – an extracurricular club that initially met during lunchtimes and once a week after school. The group's passion quickly grew, giving way to further meetings on Saturday mornings and during school holidays. This dedication laid the foundation for what was to become an extraordinary student-led initiative.

By November 2023, driven by the emotional depth of the project, the students decided to create a legacy by transforming a forgotten corner of the school grounds into a memorial garden. The group's artist designed a commemorative mosaic, drawing inspiration from the school's values, contemporary global issues and the Holocaust project itself.

In January 2024, the students began clearing the area and set themselves an ambitious goal of completing the memorial garden by 21st June that year, to coincide with Refugee Week. Mosaic sessions with a local artist took place on Saturdays throughout April and May, steadily bringing the vision to life.

Thanks to a determined push during the May half-term holiday, the garden was completed on time and officially opened on 21st June, as planned. The unveiling was a deeply moving occasion, attended by relatives featured in the original BBC programme, representatives from refugee support organisations and local community leaders. The project even caught the attention of local media, and was featured on regional radio.

The resulting recognition prompted the students to produce a short film about their garden for the international My Hometown initiative organised by UCL's Centre for Holocaust Education, eventually leading to an invitation to Westminster. The students – who were now deeply engaged in gardening and historical commemoration, and confident in their skills – looked ahead to upcoming 80th anniversaries marking the end of WWII and the liberation of Auschwitz, and chose to enter the prestigious BBC Gardeners' World Live Beautiful Borders competition.

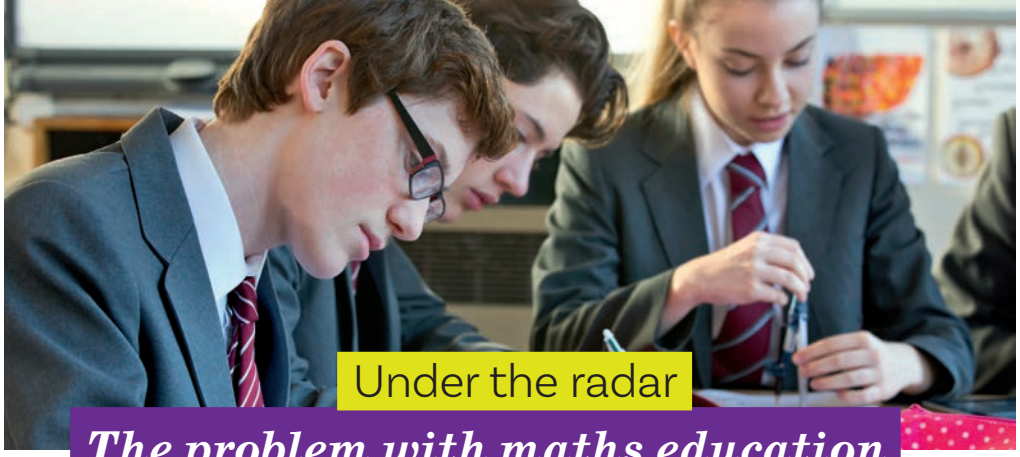
They submitted a design in January 2025 (pictured above) that incorporated key themes from their school memorial garden, the commemorative mosaic and visual acknowledgement of the significant anniversaries taking place that year.

Their garden concept focused on the building of intergenerational and interfaith connections, while encouraging a closer bond with nature. The symmetrical layout, defined by pebble pathways, symbolised reflection and unity. At the heart of the garden design lay a tranquil reflection pool.

Each plant was chosen for its symbolic meaning, together conveying a message of peace, healing and remembrance. A silver birch tree – which are known for their resilience and ability to regrow in the wake of devastation – invites visitors to hang the names of their lost loved ones, making the garden a living memorial.

The students' hope was for this multi-sensory space to not only honour the past, but also inspire hope for the future. And as a school, we were incredibly proud when their garden design was ultimately selected to appear at the BBC Gardeners' World Live event that took place in June this year at the NEC Birmingham.

DEBORAH HAYDEN IS A HEAD OF HISTORY



Under the radar

The problem with maths education

The House of Lords Science and Technology Committee has written to Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, expressing concern at the current state of maths education across the UK (see tinyurl.com/ts145-LL2).

The letter followed an evidence session, at which the Committee heard from a range of maths education experts, consultants and advocates regarding the challenges that are currently being faced by maths educators.

A recurring talking point among witnesses was that the continuing focus on securing Grade 4 maths passes at GCSE, allied to annual grade boundary adjustments, resulted in 30% of students being unable to obtain grade 4s in maths each year, even after taking resits. In its letter, the Committee raises the idea of introducing a new 'functional mathematics' qualification, which would allow both school leavers and adult learners to demonstrate their application of practical numeracy skills relevant to daily life.

One possible approach to this would see the existing GCSE curriculum split into 'functional mathematics' on one side, and a more abstract 'pure mathematics' component on the other, the latter of which students would require for further study.

The evidence session also saw discussion of how targets for recruiting maths teachers have been consistently missed for more than a decade, despite previous government offers of generous bursaries. Potential solutions to this suggested by witnesses included expanding access to CPD, offering more flexible working arrangements, recruiting from a wider pool of graduates and post-graduates, and adopting transitional training programmes that would enable teachers in other subjects to become maths specialists.

The evidence session can be viewed in full via tinyurl.com/ts145-LL3

TRENDING

Our pick of the recent resources and launches teachers might find useful...

FORWARD THINKING

Samsung's 'Solve for Tomorrow Next Gen' learning programme for 11 to 15-year-olds is back for its fifth year, once again hoping to inspire the next generation of innovators. On offer are interactive video lessons, online safety and careers resources, and a fun, easy-to-enter design challenge (the closing date for which will be July 25th 2025). **samsung.com/solvefortomorrow**

PASS IT ON

Insurance broker and Premiership Rugby sponsor Gallagher has announced the launch of the Gallagher Touchline Academy – a free rugby teacher training programme aimed at state schools in England. Participants will get to attend an in-person training session at a Gallagher Premiership Rugby club, after which they'll receive a six-week lesson plan to help them deliver rugby sessions at their school. **tinyurl.com/ts145-LL4**

1 MINUTE STUDENT CPD

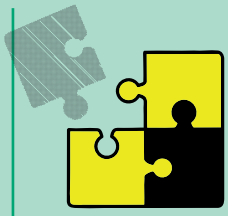
5 WAYS TO ADAPT YOUR TEACHING

ZEPH BENNETT HIGHLIGHTS SOME FURTHER CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DIFFERING NEEDS

1

COLLABORATING

Facilitating peer or collaboration work lets students experience different perspectives and receive support when defining concepts



2

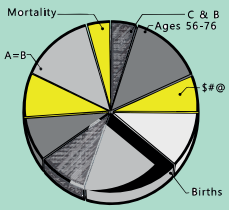
CHUNKING

Everyone benefits from breaking down content into manageable chunks; complex tasks will require careful processes that reveal the concept gradually, to ensure students are getting it

3

REVISITING

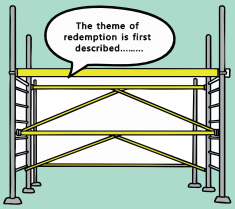
Activating prior knowledge at the start of the lesson can help determine the lesson's narrative; it can also help to use a 'KWL' chart (what I **know**, what I **want** to know and what I've **learnt**) at the end of the lesson



4

VISUALISING

Visual tools, like graphic organizers and infographics, can help present new information in ways that foreground relationships between concepts (e.g. a pie chart showing percentages via differently-sized segments)



5

SCAFFOLDING

Provide students with an initial starting point from which to develop their answers, by presenting them with sentence starters that lead to more in-depth questions

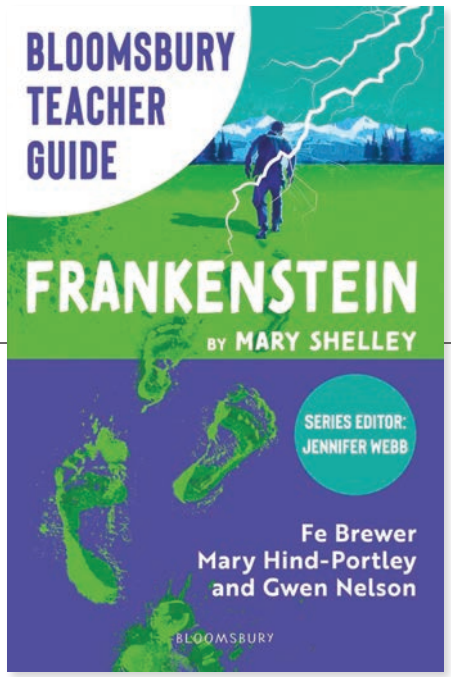
ZEPH BENNETT IS A PE TEACHER AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT LEADER WITH 25 YEARS' TEACHING EXPERIENCE; YOU CAN FIND MORE OF HIS EDUCATIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY FOLLOWING @ZEPHBENNETT.BSKY.SOCIAL

Got a great learning idea? Email editor@teachsecondary.com or tweet us at @teachsecondary

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bloomsbury Teacher Guide – Frankenstein

A comprehensive companion to the teaching of this classic heritage text...



AT A GLANCE

- **An in-depth analysis of the classic novel for secondary school students**
- **Neatly divides the story into manageable chunks**
- **Includes a range of well-pitched activities**
- **Written by teaching experts; informed by research**
- **Essential reading, whether you're teaching the whole book or dipping in and out**

REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus (to give it its full title, complete with original, excessive punctuation) ticks all the boxes for an in-depth KS3/4 literature unit. Despite being a heritage text, it carries so much current cultural prominence that practically everyone is aware of it.

Right now, you're probably picturing a slab-headed figure with a bolt through its neck – even though you, as an educator, know that this is an inaccurate representation of the creature, who in any case *isn't even the title character.*

Yet, for all the omnipresence of the monster in our collective consciousness, the full story as told in Mary Shelley's 1818 Gothic novel is probably not as widely understood. Yes, most people are aware that it involves a mad scientist constructing an animated, sentient, human-like creature out of spare body parts, but the novel is far more convoluted than that. For one thing, as a heritage text, the language is often quite dense, requiring a fair amount of unpacking for modern readers.

Turning it into a quality teaching unit would be a daunting prospect for anyone. Fortunately, however, Bloomsbury is here to lend a hand.

This comprehensive, meticulous and well-researched book is an indispensable guide to the teaching of *Frankenstein*. Written by experienced educators, it clearly demonstrates a keen understanding of the needs of the busy teacher – not least through its helpful structure, which enables you to rapidly look up precisely what you need to know, whether you're teaching the book as a complete unit, or dipping in and out of certain sections.

Following a necessarily lengthy instruction and introduction section, the book is divided into a series of discrete parts, each covering a handful of chapters and focusing on a phase in the development of one of the novel's various narrators and core characters. Each part begins with a useful overview, covering themes and significant plot events, before launching into the key questions of '*Why?*' '*What?*' and '*How?*' – through which, every conceivable aspect of the novel is unpicked and discussed.

As you'd expect, there's also a wealth of supporting materials, including sample questions and suggested answers, as well as essay question stems. Further resources are available online, as indicated by a computer mouse icon. One feature I found particularly appealing was the use of 'Pit Stops', which provide a pause for specific learning and assessment activities. These take the form of suggested retrieval and extension exercises, as well as academic writing points to deepen understanding. (One glance at the references section underlines how seriously the authors take this last point.)

For all its depth and complexity, this guide is accessible, well-structured and usefully signposted – which is just as well, considering it runs to nearly two thirds as many pages as the Penguin Classics edition of the original! It really is amazing how much richness and life it's possible to derive from a single body of work.

teach SECONDARY

VERDICT

- ✓ Comprehensive and meticulous
- ✓ Authoritative and informative
- ✓ Well-organised and clearly signposted
- ✓ Detailed, yet accessible
- ✓ An ideal support for busy teachers

UPGRADE IF...

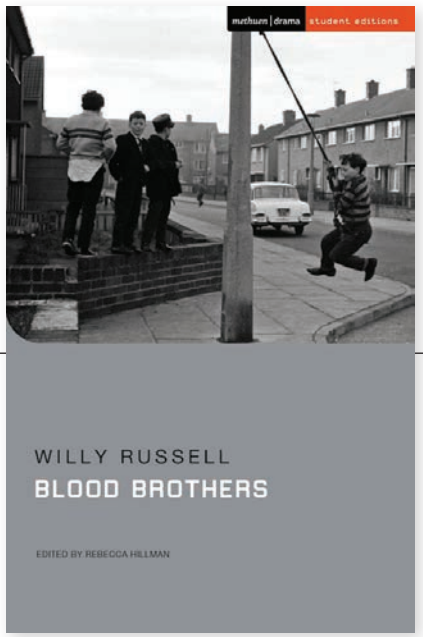
...you want an informative and knowledgeable, yet accessible companion for teaching this seminal work of literature.

£16.99 paperback / £15.29 Ebook RRP; see bloomsbury.com for more information

DRAMA & ENGLISH

Blood Brothers

A richly informative new edition of Willy Russell's hugely influential play



methuen | drama

AT A GLANCE

- **A new Student Edition of a classic text, with expert commentary and accompanying notes**
- **Features a chronology and introduction, plus notes on historical context, form and genre**
- **Informed, modern analysis of the play's topics and themes**
- **Provides scope for further explorations of political theatre and classical tragedy**

REVIEWED BY: JOHN DABELL

It's hard to imagine that Willy Russell's *Blood Brothers*, one of the longest-running musical productions in West End history, was originally developed as a 70-minute school play first performed in Liverpool in 1981 for an audience of teenagers. Focused around fraternal twins separated at birth, *Blood Brothers* is alternately moving, funny and heart-rending – a classic story of nature versus nurture, adoption, identity, love and inequality that's endured, and retained the privilege of being a set text for GCSE English Literature and Drama courses.

Methuen Drama, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, has now published a revised Student Edition of *Blood Brothers*, complete with expert commentary that gets right to the heart of the complex topics the play grapples with. This edition commences with a short chronology and a perceptive introduction that clearly sets out what *Blood Brothers* is all about, breaking down the world Russell portrays. We then move into a concise historical overview of the period in which the play was written, touching on the political landscape, entrenched class divisions, poverty and social insecurity of the time.

Elsewhere, there's a chapter on form and genre explaining how *Blood Brothers* is a social realist text *par excellence* on one level, while also working as a folk ballad with an epic quality. It's a drama where the ending is revealed at the very start, with much to learn, analyse and understand as we watch the preceding events unfold.

This edition invites us to understand that while *Blood Brothers* has come to be seen as a Liverpudlian folk opera, Willy Russell effectively wrote the play for all the 'Liverpools' that exist throughout the world. We're encouraged to see how, despite the drama's clear specificity to place, the human interactions that play out make it timelessly relatable.

Having garnered a reputation as 'The standing ovation play', this Student Edition also acknowledges *Blood Brothers*' status as a bona-fide, globally acclaimed smash hit musical – albeit one that doesn't shy away from difficult topics related to social upbringing, class, inequality and injustice. Over the course of many, many productions, it's remained an extremely witty, often dark and deeply poignant work, still thematically resonant to life as it's lived today and defiantly universal – however parochial its concerns might initially seem on the surface. Just reading the lines of this Student Edition, while seeing the production come to life in your mind's eye, is enough to send shivers down your spine.

In keeping with the quality of the text itself, this Student Edition is a class act – packed with lucid, easily digestible, yet valuable insights that will help students think about and analyse the meanings and intentions of the play with greater care. It's also a welcome reminder of why *Blood Brothers* deserves to be part of our cultural DNA.

teach SECONDARY

VERDICT

✓ The supporting notes are highly accessible and rich with insights
✓ The well-judged chronology and historical overviews will equip students with valuable context for understanding the play in more depth
✓ Encourages critical engagement and more sophisticated comprehension of the text

UPGRADE IF...

You are looking for an intelligible, digestible and readily accessible student text of *Blood Brothers* that gets to the heart of the play's portrayals of class struggle and social inequality

Request your free inspection copy at **bloomsbury.com/blood-brothers-9781350386198**

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

Just the facts

John Lawson shares his thoughts on the anti-teacher political moves unfolding stateside, and what we can do to prevent the same from happening here...

US Vice President JD Vance recently added another profession to his 'enemies of the state' list – teachers.

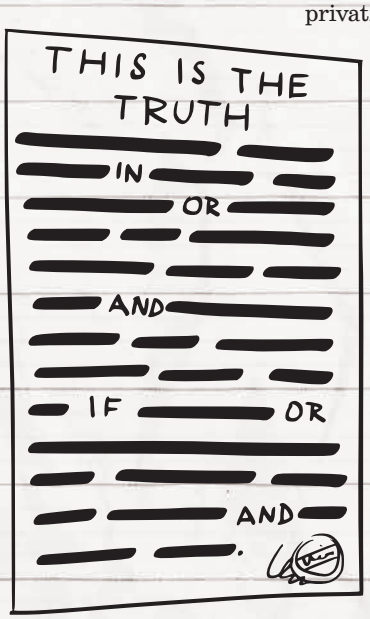
During a recent speech, he made reference to a "*Very wise man, Richard Nixon, who said, 'Professors are the enemy'.*" Vance then needlessly paused for applause. There can be few bona fide intellectuals nowadays who would trust either the veracity or sagacity of Nixonisms.

For more evidence of the current US administration's enmity towards teachers, we might also consider President Trump's determination to terminate the federal Department of Education. So what's happening?

I suspect that this hostility may be down to how the world's finest educators will insist upon intellectual rigour and dedicate themselves to the pursuit of objective truth – thus putting them firmly at odds with the 'post-truth' narratives many politicians are now increasingly keen to promote.

Magical people, exceptional country

Without acceptance of shared realities and objective truths, however – and in the absence of honesty from politicians, academics, the media and the public – societies simply can't function. That's not woolly liberalism talking, just plain, old-fashioned pragmatism!



As the British-Nigerian historian Professor David Olusoga has observed, "*History cannot just be a conveyor belt, merely delivering victories and heroes. If you only want to be told that you are part of a magical people from an exceptional country, and history's only job is to make you feel proud, then I'm not sure you are engaged in history.*"

Olusoga captures perfectly how some politicians prefer to view US history. They will urge American citizens to regard themselves as a 'magical people' from an 'exceptional country', who should only concern themselves with America's magnanimity.

For my part, I've spent 25 years in the USA, and became a proud citizen in 2013. Some of the kindest and warmest people I've ever met hail from the Midwest and Florida. There's much to love and admire about the 'can-do' spirit of Americans – but I also quickly learned to avoid mentioning the many innocent people in Korea, Vietnam and elsewhere crushed over decades by the juggernaut of American foreign policy.

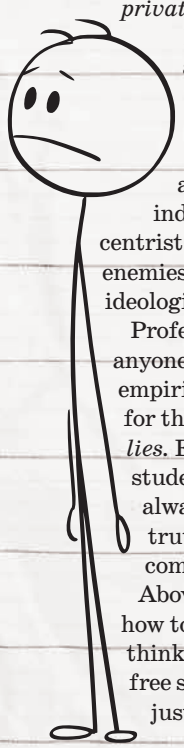
Going further back, I can still remember being soundly slapped in primary school for once questioning why everything British was unquestionably 'the world's finest'. How was my Dad's clapped-out Ford Anglia better than a Cadillac?

The British and the Americans have traditionally been quite partial to hearing heroic stories about themselves. So it follows that teachers in England and America can teach the 'truth' – but if it's the '*whole truth and nothing but the truth*', you might need a little help from the divine.

The common good

I recently managed to ruffle some feathers on X by posting the following inconvenient truth regarding the value of democracy: "*I have a definitive answer to the dictatorship nonsense emerging predominantly from far-right podcasters. Democracy already allows for an elective dictatorship – we vote for great leaders and parties for as long as they deliver on their manifestos – but dictatorships don't allow for democratic choices. Nobody needs despots who are contemptuous of the common good.*"

Witness how Professor Noam Chomsky's views on privatisation have, for many years, displeased Republicans and Thatcherites alike. He once described the 'standard technique of privatisation' thusly: "*Defund, make sure things don't work; people get angry, you hand it over to private capital.*" That sounds familiar.



I still love and respect both Britain and America, but teachers should never be reduced to right-, or indeed left-wing propagandists. Many teachers will often find themselves attracted to the intellectual independence that comes with holding centrist positions. That might make us enemies of political parties, leaders or ideologies, but not of society.

Professors will do their best to challenge anyone obliterating the lines between empirical truths and 'alternative facts', for the simple reason that *we must despise lies*. Every day should see us teaching our students (explicitly or implicitly) to always value objective facts, locate truths and act with integrity, humility, compassion and respect for others.

Above all, we should be teaching them how to be independent and logical, critical thinkers who can exalt the noble ideals of free speech, equality, love, liberty and justice for all.

A student-centred curriculum, resources and delivery.... why is all learning not like this!

~ Nicky Ashby-Guest, Lead Practitioner: Outreach, Training & Development, The Gallery Trust

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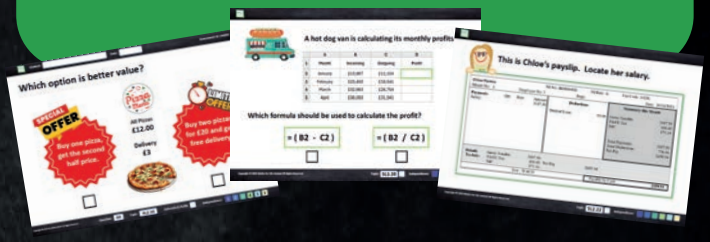

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