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INTERVIEW



LUCY WORSLEY

*"I was a very
geeky student"*

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'Outstanding'
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FROM THE EDITOR

“Welcome...”



At last, it's here. On November 5th 2025, the independent review of England's curriculum, assessment and qualifications system overseen by Professor Becky Francis published its final report. Many across the profession were awaiting its contents with keen interest, and for good reason. The government's official response seems to suggest that review's recommendations will be adopted in full – which, as noted in this issue's news section, will include a

higher status for arts subjects, a new core enrichment entitlement and students taking triple science GCSE as standard.

Those proposals go some way towards addressing concerns that secondary educators have expressed for some time – but it's arguably the review's recommendations for KS1/2 that give the clearest indication of a philosophical shift having taken place. See how, for example, the report baldly states that the primary English Programmes of Study should, *“Include a stronger focus on using and applying grammar rather than on identifying theoretical constructs by name, which is not developmentally appropriate or meaningful.”* That's a pointed rejection of whatever remains of Michael Gove's educational legacy if ever I saw it.

And thus, the pendulum swings back. Arts specialists will be celebrating and writing out their shopping lists. Site managers will be telling excited history teachers which rooms they can use for their after-school wargaming club. Science teachers will be cautiously appraising their inventories.

However, it's worth considering the timeframes involved here. The last comparable overhaul of what schools must teach took place under the then coalition government, which set out its own National Curriculum plans in October 2013, and had them come into force from September 2014. Here in the present day, we've been told to expect Labour's final curriculum to arrive in spring 2027, and schools to start teaching it from September 2028. At that point, there'll be another General Election due before the academic year is out, if we haven't already had one by then.

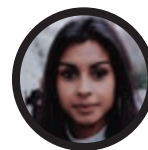
I'm again reminded of how Finland's Education Agency operates largely outside of direct party political influence, setting a broad outline for the country's National Curriculum which then serves as a basis for the curriculums adopted by different municipalities and/or schools. Given where we currently are, and the prevailing chatter regarding the prospects of certain UK parties come election time (mentioning no names here, but Melissa Benn has some thoughts on that over on page 17), I can't help wondering if this is the start of another 14-year curriculum stretch, or whether things will dramatically change again sooner rather than later...

Enjoy the issue,

Callum Fauser

callum.fausser@theteachco.com

On board this issue:



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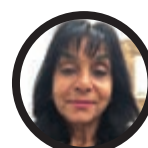
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Meena Wood is an author and a former principal and HMI



Colin Foster is a professor of mathematics education

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**teach
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The newsletter

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

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67

Teens drawing 'Siiiiix, seveeeeeen...' accompanied by a holding out of hands and alternating arm movements akin to a weighing scale or see-saw. What could it all possibly mean?

Well, if you want to do the origin story thing, then let the record show that this curious numerical catchphrase has its genesis in the lyrics of a drill (hip-hop subgenre that sounds very ominous and is often concerned with gang warfare, drug consumption and such) track called 'Doot Doot' by the artist Skrilla, hailing from the US city of Philadelphia. The specific line in question? '6-7, I just bipped right on the highway (Bip, bip)'. So far, so impenetrable. Let's unpack.

6-7, you see, is a reference to the police radio code 10-67, used by officers when a death has taken place. It may also refer to Philadelphia's 67th Street, in Skrilla's neighbourhood. The bips? Online speculation abounds, so take your pick from onomatopoeic gunshots (possibly implying in song that said death may have been Skrilla's doing) or performing an act in style - 'bipping', as per the region's local slang.

Except none of that matters. Kids are doing the 67 meme because their friends are. They're doing it because they saw someone famous on TikTok do it. The TikTok person probably doesn't remember why they first did it, but their views go up whenever they do the thing, so they do it often. And that's how culture works now.



DO SAY
"Siiiiix,
seveeeeeen..."



DON'T SAY
"Eight...er,
nine?"

BEAT THE BUDGET



Who is it for?
KS3

What's on offer?

Activity packs tailored to specific historical periods that contain rules, score sheets and other materials for learning games inspired by Channel 4's whimsical game show *Taskmaster*. The historical periods covered include abbeys and priories, Roman sites, castles and forts, and halls and houses.

What are we talking about?

Taskmaster Challenge Packs from Taskmaster Education in partnership with English Heritage



Where is it available?
tinyurl.com/ts148-NL1

WHAT THEY SAID...

"Smartphones are not just a behaviour management issue; they present clear safeguarding risks, and Ofsted's framework should reflect that more explicitly."

Shadow education secretary Laura Trott, in a letter to Sir Martyn Oliver calling on Ofsted to treat phone use in schools as a safeguarding concern

Think of a number...

£310 million

Estimated annual shortfall in funding required to provide all children from families claiming Universal Credit with free school meals, based on current National Funding Formula and Pupil Premium figures

Source: Research by Northumbria and Lincoln universities and Alliance4Children

£2.3 billion

Cost to local authorities in England of providing an estimated 520,000 children and young people with home to school transport in 2023-24

Source: 'Home to school transport' value for money report produced by the National Audit Office

9%

of 10- to 17-year-olds are presently unhappy with their lives

Source: 'Good Childhood Report 2025 report' produced by The Children's Society

ONE FOR THE WALL

"There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns"

Science fiction author, Octavia E. Butler



A new curriculum

One of the earliest pledges made by the current Labour administration was to carry out a review of the curriculum and assessment system for schools in England. It duly appointed Professor Becky Francis, CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation, to lead a Review Panel that would gather evidence and deliver a series of recommendations. And now those recommendations have arrived in the form of the Curriculum and Assessment Review's final report.

For secondary educators, the most eye-catching proposals include the introduction of diagnostic assessments in English and maths to assess students' capabilities and understanding, which would be taken in Y8 (but are entirely separate from a recent DfE proposal for a dedicated Y8 literacy assessment). The panel also calls for the removal of the English Baccalaureate, citing its constraining effect on students' GCSE choices and the lack of increased entries for EBacc subjects at 16 to 19.

In what will be welcome news for teachers of the arts, the panel recommends revising the KS3 programmes of study for music and drama, and enabling broader access to both subjects at KS4. The report additionally calls for an entitlement to triple science at GCSE, ensuring that any student who wishes to pursue that option can do so. There's also a recommendation that the government work with Ofqual to reduce the overall exam time of GCSEs by 10%.

Needless to say, there's considerably more within the review panel's recommendations that we'll look to explore further in future issues. For now, you can read them for yourself via tinyurl.com/ts148-NL2.

▼ **SAVE THE DATE** ▼

SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

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



THE SPEECH:

HMCI addresses Confederation of School Trusts annual conference

WHO? Sir Martyn Oliver, Ofsted's Chief Inspector

WHERE? Confederation of School Trusts 2025 annual conference in Birmingham

WHEN? 17th October 2025

“We are making things fairer for teachers by giving true detail in our judgements that allows all schools to show their strengths. By sharing provisional grades as we work with you during the inspection, with early feedback that will cover all the points you can expect from the written report card – and by shouting about the positives. There are many good examples out there; we will celebrate the best while supporting those in greatest need.

There is a persistent, yet flawed story of a poor set of inspection grades automatically leading to headteachers being removed. And I stand here now and say that, throughout my career, I know this is not true. Every school leader I've ever met – including those on the receiving end of a bad set of results or a disappointing Ofsted grade – were in the job for the right reasons.

We all exist to raise standards for children: it is why pressure exists, and we can never fully take that away. But we should all work to remove the pressure which is unnecessary. That's why the narrative of 'schools vs Ofsted' and 'Ofsted vs schools' is so unhelpful. Because what we all do is too important to be used for political ends. We have an enormous responsibility towards children, and also towards our staff. We have to give people a chance to get better, while always ensuring the best outcomes for children.”

THE RESPONSE:

NASUWT responds to government's pay proposals

FROM? Matt Wrack, general secretary of the NASUWT

REGARDING? The government's recommendation to the School Teachers' Review Body of a pay offer to teachers amounting to 6.5% over three years

WHEN? 30th October 2025

“These proposals are only likely to exacerbate the current recruitment and retention crisis in teaching and lead to further reductions to support, resources and provision for pupils in our schools. We believe pay must increase significantly above RPI inflation for 2026 to begin restoring the losses of the past decade.”



19-20 NOVEMBER 2025 Schools & Academies Show | 25 NOVEMBER 2025 Dyscalculia Conference 2025 | 21-23 JANUARY 2026 Bett

19-20 NOVEMBER 2025

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

The '#SAASHOW' will be once again be setting up shop at the NEC, Birmingham this autumn for another two days of CPD centred on strategy and school improvement, and opportunities to meet with and learn from fellow leaders across the country. As always, there'll also be a sizeable and thoughtfully curated exhibition floor hosting numerous suppliers and solution providers.

25 NOVEMBER 2025

Dyscalculia Conference 2025
Online event
bdadyslexia.org.uk/events

Subtitled 'Drawn to Numbers: Empowering Children to Understand Maths', this virtual conference organised by the British Dyslexia Association is aimed at classroom teachers and will explore resources and strategies that can empower dyscalculic learners. Topics covered will include use of visual imagery to illustrate maths concepts, and how creative approaches to the subject can engage reluctant learners.

21-23 JANUARY 2026

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uk.bettshow.com

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Get Into Film

Into Film's CEO, Fiona Evans, shares her thoughts on the publication of Curriculum and Assessment Review's final report



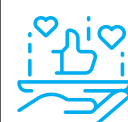
Restoring equal status for creative subjects at GCSE, including film and media studies, and introducing a new, universal extra-curricular enrichment entitlement for every pupil, are bold and positive steps towards a richer, broader and more inclusive education system.

These reforms don't just benefit the future of the UK's world-leading creative and screen industries. By embedding media literacy in compulsory citizenship from primary school, they will empower young people to navigate our increasingly complex digital world with confidence, creativity and critical awareness – skills essential for thriving both as citizens, and in their future careers.

Through working with two thirds of schools nationally – from supporting teachers to improve media literacy in the classroom, to supporting extra-curricular activities through our free Festival and 8,000 Film Clubs – we know how these reforms will transform learning, widen horizons and enrich the lives of young people across the country.

We look forward to partnering with schools, educators and the government to ensure every young person can experience the power of film and filmmaking as engaging tools for learning, sources of cultural enrichment, and dynamic pathways to the skills needed for life and work in the 21st century.

For more information, visit intofilm.org

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

Michael Rosen @MichaelRosenYes

The Curriculum and Assessment Review has given your grammar curriculum a right going over. Thoughts? @michaeltgove

David Veevers @davidveevers.bsky.social

What HE managers fail to understand is that in the context of the humanities, 'employability' isn't teaching coding or carpentry, but skills around writing, presenting, reasoning, evaluation, analysis, research etc. In an 80% service economy, these are the skills that fundamentally matter.

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TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

Testing, testing...

The school's headteacher was a commanding figure – and in an exceptionally bad mood during one morning assembly, following an incident of poor behaviour by some students in the local community the previous day. As he forcefully expressed his disapproval before the school, you could have heard a pin drop. Building to a crescendo, he said "I've just got one last thing to say to you..."

And at this exact moment, courtesy of an electrician somewhere, apparently in the process of repairing our PA system, came the words "I'm H.A.P.P.Y., I'm H.A.P.P.Y." with all the letters spelled out individually. The audience struggled to contain themselves, as the headteacher angrily stormed out of the hall to find the hapless PA technician...

Going the distance

Each year, our school holds inter-house competitions across a range of activities, including music, art, drama and sport. Once, in the build-up to that year's inter-house cross country, I told the Y7 boys how important it was that they all run as hard as they could to gain as many points as possible for their house. I placed great emphasis on the need for teamwork, and the course they needed to follow.

Just as I was about to send the boys outside for the start, one of the smaller boys stopped to ask me, "Sir – how long is the intercourse?"

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

#38 YOUR TYPE

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

Are there clues to any letters that are in your name but not in the sample?

Practice drawing the common elements of the letters. What do the curves look like? The line thicknesses? What gives the letters their unique character?

A Few Minutes of Design **YOUR TYPE**

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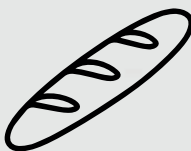
David Voisin is a head of MFL

DICTIONARY DEEP DIVE

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

PARDON MY FRENCH

Contrary to what many people think, the French 'baguette' does not mean 'bread'. It's actually short for 'baguette de pain', meaning 'bread stick'. Another word for stick in French is 'bâton' – as found in the 'baton' passed between athletes during a relay race. It also appears in Baton Rouge ('Red Stick') – the state capital of Louisiana. Finally, the third word for stick in French is 'cane', which is present in several forms in English. Examples include the compound word 'sugar cane', and the past participle 'caned', which signifies 'Hit by a stick'. 'Une cane' in French, meanwhile, means 'a walking stick', whereas 'une cane à pêche' means 'a fishing rod'.



LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

The term 'corpus', due to its obvious Latin origin, seems to belong more among the recondite

terms of an old grammar manual than the technical panoply of the 21st century linguistics researcher. No one needs to be a classicist to decipher its meaning, though, when a little morphological analysis can help. Because it's evidently linked to the noun 'corpse' and adjective 'corporeal' (deriving from 'a body'). Corpora (the plural of 'corpus') are literally bodies of language. There are different types of corpora which can serve various purposes. Corpus linguistics is a fascinating and potent field of study. Aided by computer data and AI, linguists can now filter millions of words throughout all types of sources. Through quantitative and qualitative methods, linguists can study the recurrence, predominance, disappearance and emergence of words through language and identify patterns.

The preponderance of certain classes of words in a text, for example, can betray the state of mind, or even personality of its author. Psychologists in the US recently used corpus linguistics to identify politicians who exhibited the dark triad traits (psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism), simply by examining their use of language.

TEACHING TIP: ALLITERATIONS

From poems to limericks, and all the way to song lyrics, rhymes are an author's faithful friend. The reason is simple – the reader is a pattern-seeking creature. Thus, style isn't just about semantic depth; it's also about pace, rhythm and all those other little writing tricks that don't just embellish language, but can sometimes make it sound like music.

Rhymes, however, can sometimes be a little intrusive, and not always compatible with all genres. Alliterations are more subtle, and therefore more versatile as a stylistic tool. In his book, *The Elements of Eloquence*, Mark Forsyth shows us how Shakespeare mastered their use to cement his writing brilliance.

But alliterations can be a fantastic didactic tool as well. Keen readers of Stephen Fry's books will have noticed how much fun their use can be. Give students a letter, a number and a target (such as 'P', '3' and a thing/character), and then ask them to compose a succession of alliterated words around those lexical constraints. With 'P', for instance, you could have a 'Passionate and protective person'; a 'patriarchal and pompous politician' or a 'potent, paralysing potion'.

Further clues can then be added for more challenge ('Describe a particular novel's character by using a combination of adverbs, adjectives, nouns...' etc). The possibilities really are endless. This can provide you with a ludic and competitive way to stretch pupils' lexical flexibility, discuss language and grammar with them and widen their vocabulary.



SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS



A **conductor** leads an orchestra



An **aqueduct** is a construction through which water is guided from one place to another



To '**adduce**' evidence means to bring it forward, or in support

Weathering THE STORM

Jody Cooksley offers her advice on the steps school leaders should take when preparing and planning their response in the event of an unforeseen crisis...

It's impossible to know the nature of the next crisis that might hit your school, but certain types of incidents are certainly on the rise. The digital landscape has become increasingly harmful. Weather events have grown alarmingly severe. It's likely not a question of if a crisis will occur at some point, but rather *when*.

Schools now also face additional media scrutiny with regards to cases of misconduct, with the 24/7 news cycle meaning that journalists can be unforgiving at times of pressure, and quick to pounce on stressed, unprepared spokespeople working for stretched in-house teams.

I'm aware of one recent crisis at a school that attracted more than 200 phone calls over a single weekend. It's unmanageable. Added to that is the rapid amplification of social media misinformation. Anyone can now get involved in any story, and instantly share false information about it that gets picked up by platforms' algorithms and disseminated virally at terrifying speed.

What's the plan?

Every school will regularly review its safety practices

and hold frequent fire and evacuation drills – and yet, emergency manuals will rarely cover how teams should communicate with internal and external audiences while a crisis is unfolding. And that's a mistake.

Effective communications at difficult times can strengthen your school's reputation, regardless of what's happened.

“Effective communications at difficult times can strengthen your school's reputation, regardless of what's happened”

Conversely, badly managed communications can cause years of reputational damage, even if the original incident was due to factors entirely outside of your control.

The good news is that the steps to prepare well are straightforward, and can be applied to every school, regardless of how big your internal team

is, or the extent of your in-house expertise. Follow the steps below internally, or with the help of experts, and you can ensure that your school can weather the worst of publicity storms.

1. Audit your profile

Every school is unique, with its own different characteristics – so audit yours to find out what scenarios are most likely to

occur and adjust your policies to match.

How close are you to the nearest town? How old are your buildings? Do any public footpaths run through the grounds? Take this opportunity to identify all of your stakeholders (pupils, parents, local community, alumni, etc.) and the channels you typically use to communicate with them.

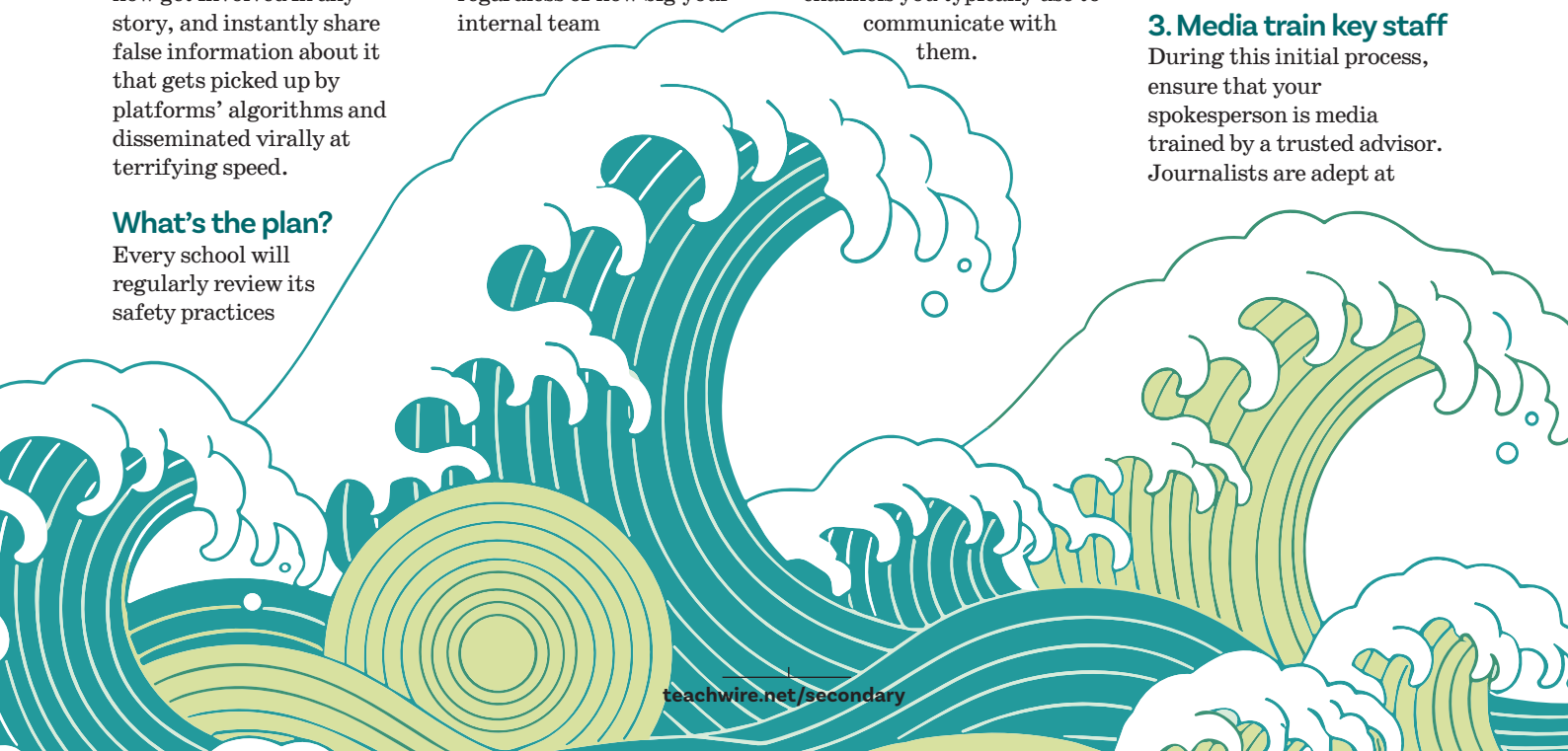
2. Establish the chain of command

It's important for your allocated spokesperson to be the headteacher, because at difficult times, families and pupils will look to leaders for stability. By their very nature, however, leadership roles in schools tend to be all-encompassing; rushing straight in to deal with the issue won't work in a crisis, because while your communications do need to be timely, they must also be *accurate* and *considered*.

It's therefore important that responsibility for your crisis communications be assigned to a dedicated team of individuals who understand their roles ahead of time. Key specialisms will include communications, IT, HR, safeguarding and potentially legal representation. If your internal team is small or inexperienced, you'll need to plan for adding ad-hoc specialists in the event of an incident.

3. Media train key staff

During this initial process, ensure that your spokesperson is media trained by a trusted advisor. Journalists are adept at



gaining information from the unsuspecting; good media training will ensure that spokespeople stick to prepared statements and remain professional. It can be worth training other members of SLT too, for times when the headteacher is unavailable (and also because it's generally more cost effective to train a group of people at once).

4. Set your communication protocols

The SLT and communications team should outline how information will be shared both internally and externally. Internal communication protocols should take into account the methods used to notify students, parents and staff; how you intend to provide regular updates on the situation; and what resources you can offer to help.

If, for example, a non-recent allegation comes to light, it may be important to alert alumni to anonymous reporting and offer resources for supporting them. External communications protocols should address best practice for media management, including materials, preparedness statements, managing journalists and allocating a space on-site to house them in the event of a major incident.

Social media should be used effectively – with, for example, pinned posts containing instructions, and continual monitoring of sentiment and message amplification around the incident.

Clear guidelines will help your team to prepare essential communication materials more quickly.

Define key elements, such as your written house style, tone of voice, policy regarding social media mentions and acceptable response times.

Trusted guidelines should strike an optimal balance of tone, emotional intelligence and content. Begin by acknowledging the incident and its impact, then outline what steps the school is taking in response. After this, conclude with a reaffirmation of the school's values and a commitment to moving forward together. One effective way of achieving that is to follow the '5 Cs method' – Concern, Commitment, Competency, Clarity and Confidence.

Factsheets can be useful communication tools during a crisis, since they're able to provide clear lists of what's known about the situation in order to reassure students and counteract potential misinformation. To that end, consider creating a factsheet template.

5. Devise key preparedness statements

Create a list of key messages that you can quickly use and adapt in a crisis. Some messaging might seek to offer reassurance, for instance: *'Our team is on call 24/7 during this time to ensure fast responses to any questions. Forecasts suggest the situation is likely to improve within xx hours.'* You may wish to emphasise safety: *'Our first priority is to ensure that all our staff and students are safe. We're working to ensure everyone is accounted for, and will then conduct a safety assessment'*

before returning to campus.' Or share trusted information sources: *'We are working closely with the emergency services to understand more about the situation.'*

6. Ensure your staff know the rules

It's not uncommon for some news outlets to send freelance investigative reporters to lurk near campuses when crises strike, hoping to catch unsuspecting staff for an off-the-cuff conversation. All staff should therefore be told that all media communications must go through the allocated person, be they a communications director, headteacher's PA, or a member of staff liaising with a trusted crisis communications agency. It's a good idea to send regular internal reminders that no one bar allocated personnel should be speaking to the media.

7. Establish a 'crisis comms cascade'

A 'cascade of information' is designed to ensure that messages are known and understood internally before being released. A standard example for use in crisis situations might look like this: SLT briefing → governance briefing → staff briefing with simultaneous staff email for non-attendees → student briefing and simultaneous student email for non-attendees → emailed parental communications alongside offer of Q&A forum with SLT → alumni communications → community communications.

8. Create your crisis communications handbook

Having undertaken these steps, you can then produce your crisis communications plan. This should comprise a handbook that will prepare senior staff to act quickly via a communications cascade that can cover any unforeseen incidents. The handbook should accompany your overall operational crisis planning, and contain clearly outlined responsibilities for implementation so that steps can be put into action immediately.

Regularly review and update your handbook so that it's always ready to be rolled out. A solid crisis communications plan will help you get the right messages out at the right time, promote calm, keep your students safe and enable you to maintain your trusted reputation.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jody Cooksley is a Senior Consultant with Chelgate Education and an expert in the sector with more than 20 years' experience of crisis communication. Chelgate is a specialist crisis communications agency with decades of expertise in the successful handling of issues and reputation management, offering trusted advice to senior leaders at every step of the process – find out more by visiting chelgateeducation.co.uk

Photo courtesy of Lillie Spibey

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TEA AD 0089 04/25

Q&A

“You don’t need lots of money to get financial advice”

Oonagh Morrison explains why it’s always worth regularly reviewing your finances with an expert



30 SECOND BRIEFING

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ABOUT OONAGH:
Oonagh Morrison is Regional Manager at Wesleyan Financial Services

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Reform UK has been a fixture of the news headlines throughout 2025 – but what do we know about their policies with regards to education?

Melissa Benn



In a speech delivered at a private Christian college in the American state of Michigan, Nigel Farage made a prediction that the entire UK teaching profession would go on strike should he ever become Prime Minister.

Speaking in early October, he claimed that this was largely because education in the UK is under the control of the ‘Marxist left’, with teachers ‘poisoning our kids’ – particularly on race issues (see tinyurl.com/ts148-MB1).

The speech made clear that should Reform ever win a Parliamentary majority, as the polls (currently) predict it might, the party would overhaul UK education in some dramatic ways. And yet, as in so many other areas, there remains remarkably little detail on the substance of Reform’s education policies.

No ‘pronoun swapping’

The party’s 2024 General Election manifesto (see tinyurl.com/ts148-MB2) paints a broad-brush picture, largely concentrating on the right’s favourite target – so-called ‘woke’ ideologies. The relevant section on education rather oddly states that *“Any teaching about a period or example of British or European imperialism or slavery must be paired with the teaching of a non-European occurrence of the same to ensure balance.”*

‘Transgender ideology’ would meanwhile be banned from schools, meaning, *“No gender questioning, social transitioning or pronoun swapping.”* There would also be 20% tax relief on private school fees, and funding cuts for universities that ‘curb free speech’.

Belinda da Lucy, Reform’s education and families spokesperson, recently reposted on X a proposal for bronze statues of Charlie Kirk – the highly controversial ‘free speech activist’ shot dead in August this year – to be placed in every UK university.

Such statements, coupled with Farage’s frequent visits to the US, would

seem to suggest that the party is looking to what’s being done there, and will try to implement similar policies here.

As things stand, progressive educators in America are looking on in deep alarm as funding for public education continues to be cut; as diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility policies are systematically dismantled, and greater state subsidies are provided to parents opting for private education, via the expansion of educational voucher schemes (see tinyurl.com/ts148-MB3).

‘Engines of social mobility’

Back here in the UK, where Reform UK won overall control of 10 councils in the 2025 Local Elections, the party’s stance on education seems even muddier.

Take Kent and Lincolnshire – two of England’s three remaining fully-selective authorities, and both Reform-controlled. The Kent group recently became something of a national laughing stock, after a leaked internal video appeared to show significant tensions between the Reform council’s leader and several of its key councillors (see tinyurl.com/ts148-MB4).

In that instance, the dispute was over ways to balance the council’s budget.



Thus far, however, the party has given little indication of its position on what’s surely a key issue in those selective areas – what to do about the 11 Plus, and the continuing existence of a large number of grammar schools.

There are two distinct political narratives concerning the function of grammar schools. The first is that they are ‘engines of social mobility’, presenting opportunities for disadvantaged children to access educational excellence. This has long been the established position of many on the political right, and certainly the view – on record, at least – of Reform UK’s all-powerful leader, Nigel Farage.

The second, alternative narrative posits that grammars actually work to compound existing disadvantage, as seen by extensive evidence demonstrating the high costs of tutoring for 11 Plus exams, accompanied by an entrenchment of social divides in selective areas (see tinyurl.com/ts148-MB5).

Pro-grammar preferences

What position, then, should a party claiming to represent ‘left behind’ communities adopt with respect to such schools? In the run-up to last year’s General Election, several Reform Parliamentary candidates signed a statement put out by Comprehensive Future (comprehensivefuture.org.uk) – a campaigning group that advocates for the end of selection and the phasing out of the 11 Plus.

Times Up for the Test (timesupforthetest.org), another anti-selection group, now plans to follow up on those statements by asking Reform councillors in Kent what their policies and plans for grammar schools are.

It’s my own educated guess that whatever the feelings of Reform councillors on the ground, in Kent and elsewhere, at the end of the day, the pro-grammar preferences of the national leadership will hold sway.



ASK THE EXPERT

Towards independence

Laxmi Dandgey explains Academy21's approach to helping students build confidence and make progress

What does research say about the benefits of stretch and challenge?

Research shows that stretch and challenge strategies are most effective when gradually increased based on student performance. The Education Endowment Foundation has found that individualised instruction can result in two to four months' additional progress annually – an approach that works best alongside high quality teaching, rather than as a replacement for it. Teaching metacognition (helping students reflect on their thinking) is also crucial for encouraging effective learning. Overall, carefully structured challenge supports progress and encourages deeper engagement with tasks, especially when tailored to individual needs.

Can you provide any examples of stretch and challenge in science?

Stretch and challenge in science can be achieved through individualised instruction, effective questioning and metacognition, and encouraging students to reflect on their thinking. At the same time, collaborative learning with assigned roles can boost engagement and interest. Dual-coding – use of both visual and verbal strategies – can further enhance understanding of scientific processes, making the abstract more concrete. This, alongside regular formative assessments, helps to identify gaps in knowledge and skills, enabling the kind of targeted feedback and adaptive teaching needed for more effective individualised instruction.

How important is it to model independence and metacognition?

Modelling independence and metacognition involves explicitly teaching strategies that foster self-regulation and reflective thinking. The EEF has highlighted the importance of professional



EXPERT PROFILE

NAME:

Laxmi Dandgey

JOB TITLE:

Deputy head of science

AREA OF EXPERTISE:

Stretch and challenge in science education

BEST PART OF MY JOB:

Seeing students grow in confidence and resilience

understanding, evaluating learning, setting challenges and encouraging metacognitive dialogue use among students. Alongside co-regulation, these approaches can support children's emotional and cognitive development through warm, responsive adult interactions. Educators can play a key role in this, by teaching regulation strategies and adjusting the support they provide based on each child's needs. As children gain experience, adult involvement can gradually decrease, thus promoting greater independence and self-regulation.

What barriers are there to providing stretch and challenge?

They include limited funding, insufficient resources and curriculum-related time constraints. Research suggests that adapting approaches for SEND environments to ensure accessibility is most impactful for older secondary students, likely due to their self-regulation skills. This highlights the need for flexible, well-supported strategies that consider individual learners' needs and developmental stages, so that stretch and challenge can be effectively implemented across diverse educational settings.

ASK ME ABOUT

- HOW I USE METACOGNITION to enhance student learning and build resilience in science education.
- THE STRATEGIES WE IMPLEMENT at Academy21 to ensure stretch and challenge strategies are embedded throughout our curriculum.
- HOW I APPLY INDIVIDUALISED INSTRUCTION and dual-coding techniques to boost engagement and deepen understanding in my science classes.

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Calls for more teaching of ‘critical thinking’ are welcome – but we still have to reckon with the information campaigns and economic incentives that are working to keep people in a state of fear, hostility and intolerance

Natasha Devon



At the time of writing I’ve just returned from Jersey, having been commissioned by its government to deliver workshops on the potential harms of social media and how to avoid them to 7,000 young people aged 7 to 18.

At the older end of that spectrum, many students asked me about the political implications of algorithms being controlled by those with nakedly far right views, and the role of disinformation in promoting racism and xenophobia. I had to be extremely careful in how I answered these questions, lest I accidentally promote any particular politics (other than the general values of tolerance, kindness, etc.) – but I did my best to answer them as honestly as I could.

Similarly, there was a recent All-Party Parliamentary Group for Teaching and Learning session – ostensibly about online misogyny – that examined efforts at radicalising boys and young men to the far right. We might tiptoe around the issue because of the sensitivities described above, but it’s all connected. If democracy is going to be saved, education will play a key role.

Extremely angry people

I’ve heard many people argue that improving critical thinking skills via the education system would all but eradicate fascistic views. I don’t disagree that literacy around data, and the ability to spot propaganda have roles to play. Yet as Jameela Jamil recently pointed out on the What’s Left podcast (see tinyurl.com/ts148-ND1), some of the finest minds in the world – not to mention considerable funding and resources – have been directed towards encouraging people to vote against their own interests, and blame their circumstances on scapegoats. Framed that way, it’s not necessarily a lack of intelligence we’re up against.

Over the past couple of months, some

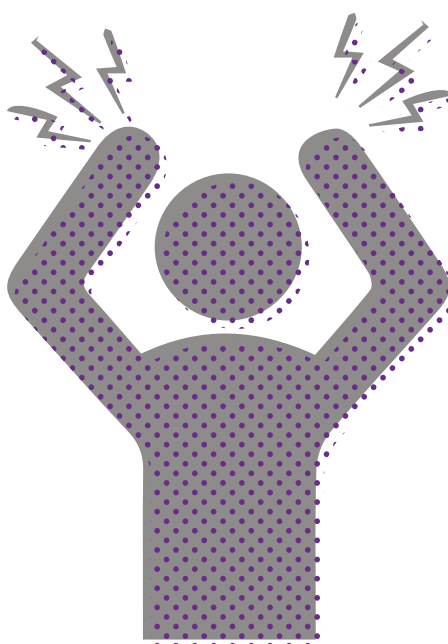
clips from my weekly LBC show, in which I’ve invited genuine experts to give verified facts about immigration (as opposed to the more dubious ones that circulate on Facebook) have gone viral. As such, my feeds have become full of extremely angry people who don’t enjoy having their biases or belief systems challenged.

Apparently, ‘we can’t trust official government figures’, or institutions like universities, or charities working with refugees, or scientists. Instead, we should put our trust in dubiously and opaquely funded organisations calling themselves ‘think tanks’, or some random, often anonymous online content creators.

Thinking the worst

Traditional wisdom might label these people stupid, but consider the following, very typical interaction.

A woman who initially said that all refugees should ‘*Stay in France*’ recently wrote beneath one of my reels



that we should ‘*Look after our own first,*’ and referenced the number of British homeless people. I told her I agreed that more should be done to support people without homes, which is why I’ve donated to, and volunteered for the charity Crisis. I was trying to demonstrate that it isn’t an either/or; that one can care about refugees and homeless people simultaneously. She then called me a ‘do-gooder’.

Looking at the accounts of people obsessed with ‘small boats’, they tend to also post a lot about how unemployed people are ‘lazy,’ and how those with mental health issues are ‘malingering’. Anyone who disagrees is ‘virtue signalling’.

It’s not intelligence these people lack. It’s empathy. They think the worst of their fellow humans at every given opportunity. They can’t imagine what it’s like to be anyone who isn’t exactly like them.

EQ over IQ

When one considers the broader neoliberal culture we’re immersed in – one that prizes competition and individualism over community – it’s hardly surprising that so many people are like this.

Similarly, for too long, activities that revolve around group work in schools have been considered an excuse for pupils to be lazy, as opposed to teaching them the crucial skill of collaboration. This has happened alongside a general de-funding and de-prioritising of the arts, which are the best tool we have for fostering empathy, compassion and humanity.

If schools are to play a role in reducing racist violence and promoting social democracy, then it’s the wrongly-dubbed ‘soft skills’ that need to be prioritised. It’s EQ (emotional intelligence) more than IQ that defines a nation’s character.

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

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WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

Lucy Worsley looks back on her time as a 'geeky' student, how she found her true calling at A Level and the TEFL teaching that left her in awe of what teachers do...

What sort of student were you at school?

I was a very geeky student – very diligent, very hard working. The sort of student a teacher would say was a dream to teach, and all the other kids would hate. I was bored for quite a lot of the time. I'm glad not to be at school any more, let's put it that way.

The lessons I did enjoy, though, were history and Latin. I also used to quite enjoy sport, did lots of extracurricular activities – acting, music – and was also in the Girl Guides.

What was the social side of school like for you?

My friends were mainly from outside of school, through the Girl Guides and the music, rather than from within school, where I was just 'the freak'.

Things got much better during my A Levels. We were in smaller groups, getting deeper into subjects – everything became much more engaging to me then.

When did you first start to actively pursue a career in history?

My dad's a geologist, and he was keen that I be a scientist too. I don't want to draw some foolish divide between the arts and the sciences – the world needs both – but he was very clear that I



should follow in his footsteps.

So for my A Levels, I initially chose biology, chemistry and maths. After a term of that, my mother said to me, "*You're not enjoying this at all, you should change to history.*" My school was fine with that – but then I had to tell my dad. And his words have gone on to become quite famous in our family: "*If you do a history degree, my girl, you'll be cleaning toilets for a living.*"

Now, he was wrong to say that, because there's nothing wrong with cleaning toilets for a living. But also right in one sense, because I *have* spent quite a lot of my time as a grown-up talking to people about how the Tudors went to the loo...

Did anything of how your teachers taught feed in to your career as a presenter and broadcaster?

I'm aware that there's a whole world of pedagogy I'm not familiar with and have no insight into, so I'd never presume to tell teachers 'how to teach' – though I did once have a job as a teacher of English as a foreign language during the college holidays, which was the hardest job I've ever done.

The Spanish and French 15-year-olds I taught *did not want to be there*. Their parents had sent them to a strange country where they were unhappy, when they wanted to be with their friends, messing around and wasting time. It was my job to try and get them engaged,

and it was an such uphill task. The experience only lasted a few months, but it left me in awe of what teachers do, and really made me see how much effort you have to put in to engage somebody who's disengaged.

Luckily for me, that isn't generally what I've had to do since. Most people who visit historical palaces or will watch a history documentary usually have some level of interest already. I see it as my job to try and coax those people with that interest into exploring history a bit further. But making someone who's *not* interested into someone who *is* interested? That's a magic that I don't know the secret of, and yet there are teachers out there in schools doing precisely that every day. My hat to hat goes off to them.

What can you tell us about Historic Royal Palaces' Inspiring History Teaching Awards?

I love meeting history teachers, and think they deserve to be celebrated. The Inspiring History Teaching Awards have been set up to do just that. Anyone can nominate anybody, and entrants will be judged on a range of criteria – from how they've made their teaching inclusive, to their use of heritage sites and sources, and how they've encouraged students to develop skills of enquiry. We want to recognise the many different ways in which history teachers can excel.

Lucy Worsley is a historian, author and broadcaster, and was joint chief curator at Historic Royal Palaces for 21 years; for more information, visit lucyworsley.com. Entries for the Inspiring History Teaching Awards are now open; winners in 10 different regions will receive £500 personally and £500 for their school, before an overall winner is announced at the Tower of London in June 2026. Further details can be found via tinyurl.com/ts148-LW1



CLASSROOM LIFE

Turning the page

We hear how the leadership, staff and students of a struggling school in East London – one located on a small island, beside a film and TV studio – were able to enact a dramatic turnaround...



Dan MacPherson,
principal

Secured first teaching role in 2012 at a boys' grammar school in Essex,

before being appointed as a senior leader at a North London independent school. Joined the Harris Federation as a head of department, then spent five years as an assistant principal and latterly vice principal at a school in Greenwich. Was appointed principal of Harris Science Academy East London February 2023.

The Harris Federation took over what was then East London Science School – a free school that had been placed into special measures by Ofsted in 2021. The school's situation at the time was very poor, with safeguarding judged as 'ineffective', behaviour as 'inadequate', and teaching and learning as 'requires improvement'. Students only get one chance at their secondary education, so we had to work quickly to improve the

position the school was in.

The school has since changed beyond recognition. In April of this year, we were visited by Ofsted and judged Outstanding in 'leadership and management', 'behaviour and attitudes', 'personal development' and 'quality of teaching'. We've gone from being a school where children said they didn't feel safe, to one that's now thriving, growing and really delivering for the children.

For me personally, the process of transformation has been quite challenging. There's been lots of hard work done, but much of it's been hugely rewarding. What first attracted me to this school was how fantastic the children were. Both then and now, they have such a sense of drive and purpose – they just needed the right kind of

environment and provision.

I took on a new school as its founding head – my first headship, in fact – knowing that it was going to be hard, but confident that we could do it. Several years on, I'm now even more excited and certain that this school is going to be one of the best in the country within the next few years – because if we could transform to the degree we have in three years, what else





CHARACTER EDUCATION

"At the end of each term, students take two days off timetable during which we'll organise trips, in-school guest speakers and other activities.

If, say, students haven't chosen any creative subjects for their GCSE options, our Character Education Days can show them how there's still value in those skills. Making sure that every child can get at least some access to a huge range of different activities and opportunities can cause some students to suddenly realise how much they might like a field of study they've never sampled before. It's a way of giving our students a real breadth of skills, keeping their horizons open and helping them envisage more creative possibilities for their future careers."

– Isobel Harvey, head of art and character education

could we do in another three? The job is as motivating now as it's ever been.

The location of the school is quite unusual in that we're situated right beside a major film and TV studio. *MasterChef* is filmed just along the cobbled street outside. At the start of this academic year, there was a film being shot just around the corner from where we are. There's an extra layer of leadership and community relations that's needed here – we're part of a complex ecosystem made up of ourselves and other users, in what's a very special area.

Disciplined decision-making

The school where I was a deputy head underwent a similar transformation journey – having gone from being a fairly average comprehensive to being ranked among the top 10 schools in the country for progress – so I already had a fairly clear idea as to what the stages of school transformation should look like.

What was transpiring at the school when I arrived clearly couldn't continue. It wasn't serving the students, who were feeling unsafe due to inadequate behaviour and safeguarding policies, nor the staff, many of whom were having to work twice as hard as their professional peers but achieving less than a tenth of the impact. An early move was to try and bring people together, draw a line under how things had been, and resolve to move forward.

When taking on a school that's in special measures, everything needs to change immediately – though we needed to be disciplined when deciding on the order of those changes. We were fortunate, however, in being able to call on a real depth of experience from within the Harris Federation; for those

first 18 months, it was very much a real team effort.

A major priority in the first term was to get the school back to being safe and legal, and address a long list of compliance issues around safeguarding. We had to improve our site security, review our protocols and processes around keeping children safe, and review our processes for reporting and following up on concerns. I was able to work alongside an executive principal with considerable experience of Ofsted inspections, who was prepared to sit alongside me and work through all of the things that needed doing. It was that, along with other instances of support from the Federation and external providers that helped us to resolve those problems quickly, and get on to a more stable footing.

There were some other 'quick fixes' we were able to perform, but many of the students in that first year were pretty browbeaten. They knew they didn't go to a good school, and I was conscious that the change process shouldn't make them feel as though they'd done something wrong. Ultimately, students respond to their immediate environment and the people around them. My job was to try and perform the most extensive work during that first year and boost overall morale within the school. I stressed to the students that they were worthy of going to a fantastic school, had the potential to help create one and that making this fantastic school a reality would be a team effort.

Over a series of assemblies I talked about the need for us to share a common

mission, ethos, set of values and vision, and how that vision was for all of our students to go on and become leaders in whatever they choose to do. We wanted a powerful and uplifting vision with social mobility at its heart, affirming that such things weren't just possible, but *likely* and *probable* if we successfully work together.

Positive recognition

In September of the second year, all students received a brand new uniform – that was a real '*You are part of something new and special*' moment.

It was important that older cohorts, who had attended the school both before and after the changes, were able to tell Ofsted and others the story of what they went through in Y7 to Y9 – not having teachers for different subjects, being set



STUDENT LEADERS

"The school's student leaders – one per tutor group, amounting to around 20 – are elected for a year, and will meet with me every half term to review our latest student survey. I also take suggestions from them as to how the school can be made better. My guiding principle is that student voice can't be used to lower standards, make us look less professional or cause students to get lower grades.

For instance, our student leaders came up with some great ideas for reducing queueing times at lunch, prompting us to implement staggered start times for different year groups. We want our students to feel that their voices are being heard, but also understand how some suggestions might be beneficial to their short-term interests and be less positive in the long-term."

– Dan MacPherson, principal

incorrect homework, not being listened to when trying to raise concerns.

That was partly why I wanted to focus on positive recognition, and ensure that students who do the right thing feel that their efforts are recognised and valued. After establishing and codifying those habits and behaviours of what successful students do, we could then build our behaviour policy around the notion of *'Here's what successful students do'*, using that as a motivator.

Clear expectations

It was important to me, given the staff's prior experiences of poor leadership at the school, that they had at all times a clear sense of what the school's expectations would now be and why.

Leadership shouldn't be about meeting arbitrary standards. Everything we do at school should be clearly linked back to our core purpose. Every member of staff should know and understand why they're being asked to do something – though the reasons will usually involve the need to provide consistency for our students. When students can be relied upon to do what they need to do, it's easier for staff to concentrate on being great teachers. Everyone wins.

I believe that for the first time in a while, staff here know that SLT are conscious of their day-to-day experiences, and aware of the improvements they want to see. We've also clearly set out to staff how good education is the result of highly effective *teams* – not isolated individuals going above and beyond. For education to be sustainable, it has to be a team sport.

Even after that, though, you can't stop having those conversations. Once you stop talking to colleagues about your school's purpose, mission and vision, that's when things can start to fray at the edges.



Isobel Harvey, head of art and character education

Joined the school in March 2025, was appointed head of department the following September

There are continuous efforts at building a strong community here. The behaviour system is really tight – everyone's on board with it, and we're all rowing together, following the same structure, which makes things easier to manage. There's a lot of support with the systems we have in place, and the kids always know what to expect. That means they know where the line is, which is really helpful when teaching.

One thing I've wanted to prioritise in the art department is enabling students to take up more space with their artworks. I think there's a real issue in our education system with students often being encouraged to use only small sketchbooks to create relatively small pieces of work.



We've also combined art and D&T in Y7 and Y8, with students doing projects that start out as 2D creations before being turned into 3D sculptures. They then choose between doing art or D&T at Y9 – our GCSE art option is actually 'art craft and design', because I wanted to include multiple design elements, and ensure the course wasn't just based around students' demonstration of fine art skills.



Katherine Mendes, head of music

Joined in 2024, having previously been a high school teacher in Florida

One of the things I like most about working here is that compared to where I was teaching before, there's so much



more structure. There are many school-wide policies – not just around behaviour, but also around lesson planning and organisation.

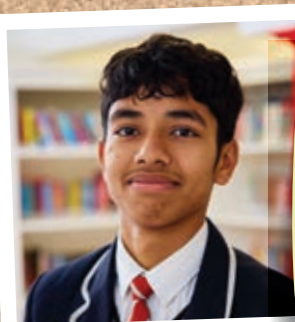
Some teachers might object to that, and complain about not having enough agency, but those guidelines for how to approach your classes actually makes it easier to be creative, identify the things

that students enjoy most within the subject and focus on those. When I've organised field trips, started extracurricular clubs and formed a student music ensemble, the school has proved to be more supportive than I ever could have imagined.

A big project for me has been the creation of a peripatetic instrument

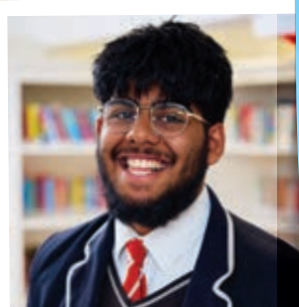
lesson curriculum. We currently offer lessons in flute, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, trombone, violin, guitar and piano. The school has been supportive throughout, both in terms of funding and making allowances for scheduling. Last year we had around 35 students signed up – this year that number's up to 65.

STUDENT ROUNDTABLE



Ikram

"When I was in Y7 at ELSS, the homework wasn't as challenging. The focus wasn't on designing homework for students, but on making it easier for teachers to grade."



Isa

"The change has been transformative. Before, there was no rigidity around upholding behavioural standards, or submitting homework in on time. The Harris Federation has implemented these new procedures that have given a backbone to the school."

Hana

"I started in Y7 before the merger with Harris, when lessons weren't as structured. Every lesson now has a Read Now, Daily Review, Exposition and Deliberate Practice."



Daniel

"My favourite subject is science, and my favourite part about school is the number of after-school clubs."



Teddy

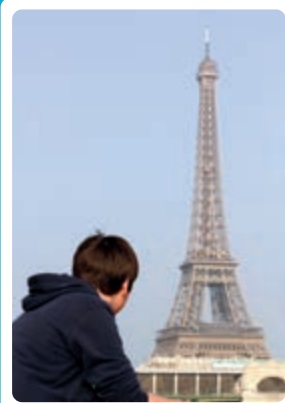
"People are getting better grades now, with better, more professional teachers. Before the school changed there were a lot of cover teachers, so some people got a less fair amount of education than others."



Jenia

"My favourite thing about school is going on trips, being part of music concerts and doing things that maybe other schools wouldn't do."

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THE TS GUIDE TO... OUTDOOR LEARNING

The rich imaginative possibilities to be had from walking in woodland; why we should fight to secure students' access to nature – and how to manage the emotional challenges of residential trips...

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Residential can significantly improve students' wellbeing – but you might have to put them and their parents at ease before you leave, advises Daniel Harvey...



IN FIGURES:

HOW MUCH ACCESS TO NATURE ARE STUDENTS GETTING?

52%

of 8- to 15-year-olds have seen no change to the amount of nature around their school in the last year; 3% report seeing less, and 20% report seeing more

43%

of children from BlackBritish ethnicities spend most of their time in nature while at school, compared to 26% of children from white ethnicities

42%

of children with a disability spend most of their time in nature while at school, compared to 26% of children with no disability

Source: The Children's People and Nature Survey for England; 2024 update from Natural England

3 TEACHWIRE
ARTICLES
FROM THE
ARCHIVES

USE WHAT YOU HAVE

Rebecca Leek explores what schools can do to lend an outdoor dimension to students' learning without any costly procurement or site redevelopment

tiny.cc/148special1

BETTER USES FOR PAST PAPERS

Philip Avery unpacks how Bohunt Education Trust embedded outdoor learning deep within its educational ethos, resulting in some profound outcomes

tiny.cc/148special2

HOW YOUR GARDEN GROWS

Gail Hovey shows how cultivating a school garden can teach students some valuable lessons they're unlikely to encounter anywhere else

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WOODLAND WONDERS

Meera Chudasama serves up five lesson activities designed to acquaint your students with the creative inspiration that can be had from woodland spaces

“A teacher took a stroll through the deep dark wood, They looked beyond the trees – and the view looked good. ‘Where are you going?’ whispered a tree. ‘Come take a walk, if you dare, with me...’”

For years, the much-beloved story *The Gruffalo* has conveyed to young people a sense of the wonder and magic to be found in the woods. Woodland is a great space in which cultivate learning experiences for students – be it learning about the biology of trees, uncovering the remarkable properties of natural structures, using the woods a stimulus for creative writing or focusing students’ attention to how we can better protect our environment.

Here, I’ve put together a range of cross-curricular woodland-related activities suitable for students aged 11 and up. All are designed to support students’ creativity and imagination, while also fostering that sense of wonder that’s so easily

lost over the course of 21st Century childhoods.

1. Leaf Poetry

Resources: White paper or exercise book, pencil and pen

Leaf poetry is a great way of getting students to repurpose fallen leaves during autumn. Before heading to the woods, students can prepare their own autumn-inspired poems, or take inspiration from the

them down into pages of their exercise books, or on a separate sheet of paper. Have the students re-write their existing poem – or even compose new verse – around, through and in between the spaces created by the leaves.

This boundless sense of poetic ‘free writing’ can emulate the same sense of wonderment when wandering through the woodlands. It’s an activity in which students are able to

“Foster that sense of wonder that’s so easily lost during 21st Century childhoods”

qualities of leaves themselves.

Then, once the students have entered your temporary woodland classroom, have them choose one or more leaves from the ground. Encourage them to use leaves in a variety of sizes, so that their pages will look and feel more texturally interesting.

Having gathered the leaves they want to use, the students can then commence sticking

merge the normally distinct disciplines of arts, crafts and writing. Free to write away from the usual strict lines, they can explore what it means to combine textures and words together in interesting ways.

Extra challenge: Make students aware of the scientific terminology referring to different parts of a leaf, such as ‘blade’, ‘petiole’, ‘veins’ and other such terms.

2. When science meets geography

Resources: White paper or exercise book, pencil and pen

There are plenty of ways in which you can incorporate brief biology lessons when observing any woodland space. For example, one group activity could see students creating a frame with their hands and proceeding to identify all the features they can see within their ‘frame’.

After this, students could draw around one or natural objects in their books or on a piece of paper, and then label the key features and characteristics of its structure. How is the natural structure of this particular object formed? What is its life cycle? What will the object look like a day, a week, a month or a year from now?

It might not be possible to reach conclusive answers to some of these questions in the moment, but it’s important that students are given the space to foster a sense of curiosity, and encouraged to write down any and all

questions that might come to mind. Be sure to also allow students the space to ask each other questions about their objects.

3. Soundscapes

Resources: White paper or exercise book and pen

Forget the other senses – get your students tuned into the *sounds* of the woodlands. Building a soundscape description can be a great way for students to stop and take notice of all the wonderful sounds that can be heard in wooded areas.

When taking strolls through woodland, have students look out for and note down all the sounds they hear. Once they've recorded their notes, or identified four to five key sounds, you can perform the following tasks either while you're there or when back in the classroom:

1. Hold a class discussion on the types of sounds the students heard. Have students try re-creating some of the sounds for themselves and building a soundscape with peers.
2. Produce a piece of creative writing that hones in on the sounds they've heard. This way, students can create more focused pieces of writing with one clear, central idea.

Extra challenge: You could ban a selection of

sounds or words that you suspect will be repeated too often, thus encouraging your students to use a broader vocabulary in the course of their writing.

4. Make the woods a VILLAIN!

Resources: White paper or exercise book, pencil and pen, assorted naturally fallen objects or recycled materials (optional)

Consider all the features and characteristics that make for a good villain. These could include a tendency to conceal information, a menacing appearance or an eerie aura. Organise a woodland walk for your students with the aim of generating inspiration for villainous creations. Have them consider and jot down their responses to the following questions:

- How could the trees be made to feel menacing?
- How could the light be shown as trying to fight through the darkness?
- In what ways could the branches be arms reaching out to get you?

Ask the students to consider how each part of the woodland could be a feature of their fictitious villain. This method of writing can enable students to use personification seamlessly, and subsequently develop a piece of writing that shows an extended use of personification.

Extra challenge: Take this task a step further by encouraging the students to draw their woodland villain. Label all the key features, then sculpt or build the villain using fallen woodland objects or recycled materials from home.

5. Story Maps

Resources: White paper, pencil and watercolour set

Have the students work in pairs, with one student sketching and painting a map of the woodland area with five to six key landmarks (which could potentially be prescribed prior to the activity). The second student then sketches and paints two to three scenes that could feature in the pair's story (which will naturally need to correspond with the first student's map).

This activity will encourage students to explore their creativity in the names they give to each place, what happens in these places, and how they want other people to use said spaces. They could even extend beyond the woodland itself, to potentially include treetop houses or underground hotels.

6. Lights, camera, action!

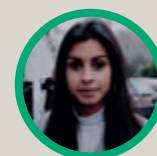
If your school has a film and/or media department, why not collaborate with them? Consider setting a short film in the woods, as outlined in a

shooting brief prepared in advance. For example:

- **Duration:** 5 to 10 minutes
- **Genre:** Action/ Thriller
- **Narrative:** Two school students enter the woods to play hide and seek; what happens when the seeker takes a turn?
- **Character(s):** Two students.

The success of this activity will ultimately depend on the strength of your class' creativity. Some students may thrive with a relatively concise and open brief, while others may need one that's more prescriptive.

When you're next in a woodland area, encourage the students to look out for key locations they can use in their short films, and at what objects can be found nearby. How could these be used to build a narrative? Once the students are sufficiently inspired, they can start to plot their stories out by storyboarding their ideas, and later filming them in the woodland area, depending on your access to the necessary equipment.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meera Chudasama is an English, media and film studies teacher with a passion for design and research, and has developed course content for the Chartered College of Teaching

GROWING MINDS

Cat Hickey explains why every secondary student deserves to gain access to nature

Securing the right to access nature for every school could have a major impact on students' academic performance, mental health and social development. It would also equip them with the skills and levels of curiosity they can expect to need in the modern workplace.

That's why ZSL's Access to Nature Campaign and petition is calling for statutory access to nature in every school across England, which would ensure that all young people get to benefit from experiencing the natural world.

At ZSL – the charity that runs London Zoo and Whipsnade Zoo, as well as conservation projects in over 80 countries – we believe that access to nature at school shouldn't be treated as an optional enrichment activity. It is, in fact, essential to young people's wellbeing, learning and ability to understand the world around them.

Declining opportunities

As students move into secondary school, their opportunities to experience nature will typically decline sharply. According to Natural England's 2023 People and Nature Survey (see tinyurl.com/ts148-NA1), the likelihood of a child experiencing nature daily at school falls from 30% in primary to just 12% in secondary.

WWF's 2024 'Schools for Nature' report (see tinyurl.com/ts148-NA2), meanwhile, highlighted how 56% of all UK secondary schools reported offering no outdoor learning opportunities at all.

Adolescence is a crucial stage for our development of



“Exposure to nature can strengthen students’ learning across all subjects”

independence, empathy and resilience – qualities that are not just essential for wellbeing, but also for our employability and chances of future success. A 2024 study published in *Educational Psychology Review* found that experiences of nature can help to reduce levels of stress and anxiety.

What's more, exposure to nature can strengthen students' learning across *all* subjects – not just those where nature is central to the subject or topic being studied. For those students who struggle to learn in traditional settings, outdoor learning can provide a chance for them to re-engage, while boosting their ability to focus, improving their behaviour and developing their confidence.

Inequality of access

These gains will likely stretch far beyond the classroom. Statutory access to nature would lead to improved wellbeing for both teachers and students, stronger post-16 progression and lower NEET rates. The government itself estimates that the NHS could save as much as £2.1bn per year if everyone was able to access to green space.

By nurturing students' awareness of climate change, sustainability and biodiversity loss, we would also be helping to build their understanding of the industries and jobs that are rapidly shaping the future – from cutting-edge green technologies and conservation science, to innovative environmental

policies, designs and approaches to education. Exposure to nature doesn't just inspire us to care more for the planet; it helps students see themselves as part of the potential solution.

And yet, despite the knowledge that many schools and teachers are doing everything they can, access to nature remains profoundly unequal. Schools in more deprived or urban areas will often lack regular access to safe green spaces, while students from lower-income families are less likely to spend time outdoors. This 'nature gap' means that those young people who could benefit the most from nature's positive impacts will often be the ones most likely to miss out.

System-wide changes

Bold initiatives, such as the National Education Nature Park (educationnaturepark.org.uk) show what's possible



when schools receive sufficient support, but these projects alone can't close the gap.

At ZSL, we see the difference nature makes every day. Our expert educators deliver practical conservation at the charity's London and Whipsnade Zoos, as well as through our educational outreach activity that provides resources and teacher training for embedding nature-based learning across the curriculum.

Through our Education Access Scheme (see tinyurl.com/ts148-NA3), we ensure that students from urban,

rural or underserved areas can experience the wonders of wildlife – often for the first time. These experiences help to build curiosity, empathy and confidence, and open young minds to new career pathways in science, conservation and sustainability.

Towards a fairer future

At the same time, however, every child across England deserves to access to those same opportunities – but to make that a reality, we will first need to see some system-wide changes be enacted by the government.

We know that schools care

about giving their students access to such opportunities. We also know that they face real and ever-pressing challenges – from competing curriculum demands and limited time to, in many cases, a complete lack of suitable outdoor space.

These barriers often aren't down to schools or teachers, but rather the direct result of a system in which not enough has been invested in nature. ZSL is therefore calling on the government to back the introduction of ring-fenced funding for nature-related school activities, professional training and support in accessing natural spaces.

Teachers are already passionate about wanting to address these issues – the government just needs to make it happen.

If young people continue to grow up disconnected from nature, then their wellbeing and our planet's very future will both be put at risk. That's the core motivation, above all others, behind our calls for statutory access to nature in every school.

Because nature *isn't* a luxury; it's a right. With proper investment and appropriate levels of government support, secondary schools can, and will help to close the nature gap – thus creating healthier and happier young people today, and a generation that's ready and willing to stand up and protect the natural world tomorrow.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cat Hickey is head of conservation education at the Zoological Society of London; dedicated to widening participation, Cat works to break down barriers for under-represented groups pursuing careers in conservation, and champions access to nature as a statutory right for all students. To find out more and sign the petition, visit zsl.org/NatureAccess



Ready for anything

Residentials can significantly improve students' wellbeing – but you might have to put them and their parents at ease before you leave, advises **Daniel Harvey**...

When I was at school, I was fortunate enough to attend residential trips that my school organised to Dorset, North Wales, Chester and Paris. They were amazing fun at the time, and I still have fond memories of loading the minibuses to Bets-y-coed, queuing up to see the likes of *Star Trek III* in Dorset and *Rocky III* in Chester (having failed to get in to see *Who Dares Wins*) and tasting mille-feuille in every bakery that my friends and I happened to walked past in Paris.

Providing the students in my school with similar opportunities is one of the reasons why I've directly and indirectly supported the organisation of many such trips over the past couple of decades.

Outward-bound residentials

A residential trip offers students the chance to take part in new activities and experiences in ways that can leave life-long memories. Many primary schools will try to offer similar kinds of trips in Y6, specifically to give students a collective moment, or moments, to celebrate their time at KS1/2. And often, those primary students will get to look back wistfully at this key moment of their life, with its happy memories of challenges and opportunities accepted in the company of their friends.

Many secondary schools will offer outward-bound activities to Y7s to encourage

team building and bonding within what will be a new school culture for them. These trips can provide a secondary school's latest intake with some big, impactful moments just as they're meeting new classmates and making new friends, all whilst facing tough challenges (and trying to stay dry).

There can also be other aims in play – such as my school's offer of a residential outward-bound trip to all Y8s, solely to provide them with a special experience during a curriculum year that's often missing unique milestones of its own.

And yet, despite the clear

participants that the trip will become a highlight of their school experience.

Support for anxiety and mental health

All schools naturally *want* their trips to be inclusive to all students. I can very rarely recall any cases in which students were effectively excluded from participating in a trip from the outset.

At my own school, this has only ever happened once – after a student's behaviour was assessed by key staff who knew the student, and concluded that their standards of behaviour couldn't be relied upon when away from the familiar

certain parents and their children so that they can build up sufficient trust and confidence in the idea of being away from home, and potentially facing some deep-seated worries.

Trip leaders should actively liaise with colleagues overseeing safeguarding and wellbeing so that a clear understanding can be built of different students' needs, and what provisions might help them when they're away from home. At the same time, those colleagues can also be telling the students they work with about the various benefits and upsides of going on such trips. These

“Get to know the staff at the centre you've chosen and their preferred ways of working”

benefits for those children taking part, some young people will find the challenges of a residential visit away from home – to say nothing of the physical activities that are meant to be at the core of the trip – simply too different, and just *so much* that they won't want to take part.

If the school wants to make sure that its trips are inclusive, however – and ensure that the students in question can better understand how their anxieties can be overcome when away from home – they might want to take a number of steps beforehand to support and reassure all

school environment and their parents.

For many students affected by mental health or anxiety issues, however, going on a residential could actually be an excellent way for them to achieve some notable successes. Careful staff selection, consistent communication with parents and students, and clarity as to the activities and demands that the trip will involve can all go a long way towards helping participants make suitable preparations, and ultimately make the trip a triumph for all involved.

Occasionally, it might be necessary to organise separate meetings with

strategies and recommendations can then be shared with parents and students ahead of time.

Pre-trip activities

Ski trips in particular can often benefit from pre-trip activities that will help students to prepare. A visit to your nearest snow dome will give students some first-hand experience of the



temperatures they can expect once they're there, while also enabling them to attempt some practice skiing and potentially build up their confidence.

Similarly, if the trip will entail some significant physical challenges – such as climbing or abseiling – try to organise some practice sessions based around those disciplines with the help of a local provider.

Liasing with the activity centre

It's extremely important that you get to know the staff at the centre you've chosen for the residential and their preferred

ways of working. My school has been organising regular trips to the same centre in North Herefordshire for some time, with the result that there are now excellent lines of communication between the centre and our trip leaders.

We'll give the centre prior knowledge of students' abilities before each trip so that the staff there can build a bespoke set of activities. Under some circumstances, they can even provide a small group of students with specific challenges just for them.

Working with the right people always makes a huge

difference. If you're working with a centre where staff get to know their guests well, and can adapt their work to better support the specific needs that some students will have, you'll be able look back later on what was an extremely successful trip.

If things go awry...

To paraphrase *School of Rock's* Principal Mullins, however – “*School trips can go awry!*”

Just as you would for any activity that's planned in advance, make sure you know what you're going to do if things don't work out, and share those contingency plans with the staff you'll be taking with you. After all, you'll want them feeling less anxious and more confident at the prospect of having to deal with such situations.

For those students already receiving some form of regular support from school staff, just knowing that phone calls can be made to key support staff – trained individuals already familiar to them – will give them welcome peace of mind.

Planned contact with home

The organising of any school visit or residential should always include clearly outlining to parents how and when students will be able to use mobile phones. For example, one secondary school local to us that runs a regular Y7 residential outward-bound trip decided that students would be only be able to use their phones on the trip between 6pm and 7pm each evening.

To summarise, thorough research, robust planning and reliable communications with parents and colleagues can create all the right conditions for a successful outward-bound trip. Having the right staff in place – both those at the centre and those who'll be going with you – will ensure that you're able to provide the

ANTI-ANXIETY STRATEGIES

- Be clear as to the benefits of outward-bound trips for students' mental health, self-esteem and confidence levels, and relay these to the students themselves and their families.
- Before the trip, discuss how specific wellbeing and mental health goals can be achieved with centre staff; the best teams will build time for personal reflection and achievement recognition into your itinerary.
- Know your students before travelling. Speak to parents and school staff to gain a good understanding of who might be affected by anxiety during the visit.
- Plan specific strategies for those most likely to be worried or anxious, and share these in advance with the students, their families and centre staff.
- Maintain a positive and supportive culture while you're away, so that students can meet the challenges planned for them.
- Devise a clear and consistent policy around smartphone use during the trip, and then stick to it.

best possible support to all students at all times, thus making for an enjoyable and memorable education experience away from your school's premises.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Harvey is a GCSE and A Level science teacher and lead on behaviour, pastoral and school culture at an inner city academy

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3 KNOW WHERE GROUPS ARE AT ALL TIMES

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4 DEPLOY STAFF WHERE THEY'RE NEEDED

TrackTrail® shows where each group is in real time. This means that expedition leaders can position staff strategically based on evidence, rather than estimates. When a group has taken a wrong turn, they can be intercepted at their current location and given mentoring. This efficient deployment makes better use of limited volunteer capacity, whilst maintaining the educational value of navigational mistakes. Staff can be in the right place at the right time to support students' learning, and avoid the frustration of lengthy, uninformed waits at checkpoints.

5 STUDENTS WILL LEARN MORE

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Key Points

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Nobody should BE PERFECT

Doing everything to 100% of your ability while trying to maximise your capacity at all times will guarantee suboptimal results, advises **Colin Foster...**

None of us are perfect, but we can at least always do our best, can't we? No one can ask more than that from us. Isn't that the message we'd want to give our students? *'Try your hardest at everything, give it your best shot – and even if it doesn't turn out perfectly, you'll know that you did everything you could.'*

It sounds like the kind of positive, 'high expectations' message that we should surely be promoting and modelling in everything that we do at school, no? Well, I'm not so sure...

Your best handwriting

I can still remember a teaching colleague who kept an old-fashioned fountain pen in his pocket. He could do extremely fancy and neat calligraphic writing, which was very useful in the days when students' certificates would be handwritten. The ones he did looked superb.

However, he was known for using this pen whenever he wrote anything, always in that same elaborate cursive. It was a point of pride for him that he'd never allow a cheap Biro to sully his hands. Whatever he wrote, it would be via that slow, careful and beautiful script he was famous for. Many colleagues admired how even short, throwaway notes from him would be penned with such craft that you could frame them on the wall.

And yet, I wouldn't hold up his penmanship habits as a great example for others to

follow. Might they not equally be indicative of someone who struggles to prioritise effectively? Treating *every piece of writing* as deserving of equal attention to detail seems like an inability to distinguish between differing levels of importance.

When writing a congratulatory card, or drafting a personal letter expressing sympathy, our attempts to make our script look as good as we can may well convey to the recipient the level of care and attention we've given to the task, thus making the end result all the more meaningful and moving.

But if we then commit the same amount of care and detail when writing ourselves a quick note or shopping list, doesn't that diminish our other efforts somewhat? Adopting a single mode for everything seems like a failure to adapt appropriately to different circumstances.

Limited resources

All of us only have so much time and energy. Everyone can only write by hand for so long before their wrist starts hurting, so shouldn't we try to deploy our resources as strategically as we can?

All things being equal, we should probably take more care when writing something that hundreds of people will read than when writing something intended for only one person's attention. We should all take more care when writing something that will, say, be printed and

distributed to parents than a quick internal memo to a colleague they'll hastily read before binning.

One activity where you'll likely see this more often nowadays is proofreading emails. Some emails warrant being carefully reviewed, checked and if necessary, edited before being sent. Others simply don't. If I email you a request to send me a file I need urgently, and you reply with a curt response of *'Attached'* spelt with just one 't', that really doesn't matter – I just want the file.

“For many tasks, satisfactory is good enough”

It shouldn't be a 'point of pride' that every email you send comes with full boiler-plate, AI-generated or otherwise (*'If there are any other files that you require, please do not hesitate to get in contact with me...'*) After all, your recipient is busy too. All that extra verbiage merely indicates that you, the sender, possess questionable skills of time management and an inability to prioritise.

We should all be much more understanding of how busy and stressed our colleagues often are. I don't want to waste my time, and I don't want my colleagues to waste theirs either.

'Adequate' versus 'amazing'

This isn't a recipe for laziness and general sloppiness. It's actually quite the opposite. Economists will sometimes say that if you frequently fly and never miss a flight, then you're probably wasting far too much of your time hanging around at airports, arriving for your flights much earlier than necessary.

Absolute goals, such as *'I must never miss a flight'* or *'I must never make a grammatical error'*, would be better replaced with an acknowledgement of the trade-offs involved. Yes, I want to avoid certain errors, and make them as rarely as possible



– but if I persist with a dogged determination to avoid making errors at all costs, then I'll likely end up wasting too much time that I don't have.

For many tasks, *satisfactory is good enough*. By doing some things *adequately*, rather than amazingly, we can create a lot of additional space for doing other things to a better standard, or doing more things overall.

Or for simply taking some time to rest and recharge. Not everything will require from us the very highest level of commitment.

What can you de-prioritise?

We need to consider the things that really matter and prioritise those, but even that's only half the task. The harder part involves thinking carefully which things matter *less*, and *de-prioritising* those. For every thing

that we prioritise, we need to de-prioritise something else.

If I want to plan my lessons to a higher standard, then it may be that I end up writing my routine emails to a lower standard. That's a trade-off that I'm happy to accept.

What might be some of the things you could spend less time on – or even safely rush? What are those tasks where a few minor mistakes won't actually matter all that much? What are the things you have to do, but which ultimately don't really matter so much to that many people in the broader scheme of things?

You may still have to perform those tasks, but you don't have to *excel* at them. They need only be 'good enough'. You should feel no guilt about this; the aim isn't

to necessarily give you an easier life, but rather to enable you to be more effective in other areas.

Perfectionist expectations

Dare I say it, the same might even apply to students' efforts. Can they really be expected to be 110% committed to every aspect of every subject, every day of every week? Perhaps it's reasonable – helpful, even – for them to realise that they only have so much time and energy, which they ought to be directing towards those tasks that will have the biggest impact on their learning.

Saying 'Always give 110%' can risk setting up unrealistic, perfectionist expectations that make lots of people – students and teaching colleagues alike – feel like they've failed most of the time.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Foster (@colinfoster77) is a Professor of 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

Getting the team TOGETHER

Hannah Carter breaks down the process of honest chaos that goes into assembling an effective senior leadership team

The building of a senior leadership team is a task of such absurdity and complexity that it can feel less like a professional endeavour, and more like trying to assemble a successful dinner party from a collection of eccentric, opinionated and perpetually stressed-out guests.

The common – and hilariously naive – misconception is that a successful SLT is simply a collection of the most individually brilliant educators. You know the types. The teacher whose lesson observations are so flawless they could be sold as a masterclass. The spreadsheet wizard who knows the school budget down to the last paperclip. The pastoral guru who speaks in reassuring platitudes.

This, however, is a recipe for disaster...

The team that gels

An SLT composed entirely of all-stars isn't a team; it's a collection of virtuosos all trying to play lead guitar at the same time and inevitably producing a cacophonous mess. The true art of headship lies not in finding the best at everything, but in assembling a group of wonderfully flawed individuals whose skills and personalities somehow, inexplicably fit together like mismatched pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The headteacher is less a conductor of a symphony, and more the ringmaster of a chaotic circus. The perfect SLT isn't a collection of clones but a glorious,

shambolic mosaic of unique quirks and a range of essential functions.

The team that 'gels' is that magical, unquantifiable thing that emerges when a group of adults can sit in a meeting and respectfully disagree without anyone throwing a stapler. It's the

shared, silent understanding of an inside joke that only people who have survived the same school trip can truly appreciate. A team that gels is one where you can have a full-blown, passionate debate about the merits of a new behaviour policy, only to find yourselves laughing about it minutes later over a terrible cup of instant coffee.

Subtle social dynamics

Getting there requires more than professional competence, however. It demands the kind of emotional intelligence that can't be taught in a training course. It's about knowing when to push, when to pull and when to simply let the HR director vent for a bit about their cat.

A good headteacher will have a keen eye for these subtle social dynamics, and be capable of assessing not just a candidate's professional expertise, but their potential to fit into a pre-existing culture. So what happens when the jigsaw pieces don't quite fit, and the gelling turns to clashing?

That's the point at which the headteacher must assume the role of reluctant diplomat, driving the school's agenda forward while simultaneously somehow managing the interpersonal friction that threatens to derail it.

You must listen to both

right, it's tight. But I also hear that our pastoral lead is worried about the mental health of our students. How do we find a solution that addresses both?"

The goal is to get your team to stop seeing each other as adversaries, and start seeing problems as collective challenges. This requires the headteacher to be a master of de-escalation, a professional redirector and someone who knows when to insert a well-timed, pleasantly distracting joke to break the tension.

"The headteacher is less a conductor of a symphony, and more the ringmaster of a chaotic circus"

sides of the argument, without taking a side, and validate each person's perspective while steering them back towards a shared goal. The art of this is to separate the *person* from the *problem*. You must be able to say, *"I hear your concerns about the budget, and you're*



Managed disagreements

The complication, though, is how to do all that without disempowering anyone. When stepping in to mediate, you run the risk of sending the message that your team members aren't capable of resolving their own conflicts. When you make a decisive call to move an agenda forward, you risk alienating the person whose idea ended up not getting chosen.

A good headteacher will know that their team members' sense of autonomy and professional worth is inextricably linked to their ability to have their voice heard and ideas taken seriously. You have to create a space where disagreement isn't a sign of failure, but indicative of a healthy and engaged team. It's about ensuring everyone feels like a valued member of that team,

even when their own particular battle has been lost.

One of the most profound complexities a headteacher must navigate is that tightrope walk between tradition and inclusion. Every school is a living, breathing entity, with its own set of unwritten rules and distinct culture forged over years of Ofsted inspections and bake sales. This tradition can be a powerful force for good, providing your school community with a shared sense of stability and identity – but it can also become a suffocating, self-perpetuating echo chamber that treats any new ideas with suspicion.

SLT is the arena where these tensions will be most acutely felt. A recently added member may, for example, see themselves as a custodian of the school's best traditions with a deep respect for its history. At the same time, however, they must also be capable of suggesting that it might be finally time to let go of that photocopied worksheet dating from 1998.

Diversity, reflection and instinct

The need for diversity in leadership isn't just a moral imperative, but a practical necessity. A team that's inclusive in its makeup will be better equipped to handle the myriad challenges that a modern, diverse school community presents. The headteacher's job is to ensure that a plurality of voices and perspectives aren't just tolerated, but actively celebrated. They're not simply hiring staff; they're shaping the very future of the school.

That's why the hiring process can't be rushed, and why a headteacher must be deeply reflective when it comes to their own leadership style and imperfections. A headteacher who is a natural visionary, for instance, should seek out a deputy who can translate their wild and expensive dreams into a five-point plan with a workable budget. The leader who excels at charming governors and parents must find an internal champion who can focus on staff wellbeing and morale, and who won't be afraid to acknowledge when everyone's tired and needs to go home.

Headteachers should devise interview scenarios and tasks that reveal how candidates think under pressure, how they would respond to the truly bizarre, and their answers to the unsolvable problems that are the bread and butter of senior leadership. And whether they have the capacity to laugh at themselves. Reference checks ought to go beyond simple verification and into deep examinations of candidates' track records in successful teamwork, their integrity, and ability to build lasting relationships.

At the same time, a headteacher must also trust their instincts. A candidate who looks ideal on paper, but who gives you an uneasy feeling can sometimes represent a risk that's simply not worth taking. That 'gut

feeling' will often be a synthesis of all the subconscious cues and data points an experienced leader has collected over time, and could therefore be a powerful tool in assessing whether a given person will be a harmonious addition or a human spanner in the works.

Be the careful observer

In the end, building an SLT involves finding the right combination of people to create a form of collective genius – or at the very least, a collective who don't actively despise each other. It's a process of careful curation, of building a delicate and resilient ecosystem that can withstand the perpetual crises of school life.

The headteacher's role in all this is to act as the architect of a complex ecosystem, and be the careful observer who understands that the true measure of a team's strength isn't the individual brilliance of its members, but their ability to work *together*, support one another, and occasionally bring the biscuits.

A well-constructed SLT is the bedrock upon which a thriving school is built. It's the engine of a school's success, the beating heart of its culture and guiding force of its future. The complexity involved in building an effective SLT is immense – but the rewards, for the school and its community alike, are immeasurable. And if you're *really* lucky, they might also be fun to go for a drink with at the end of a long, hard term...



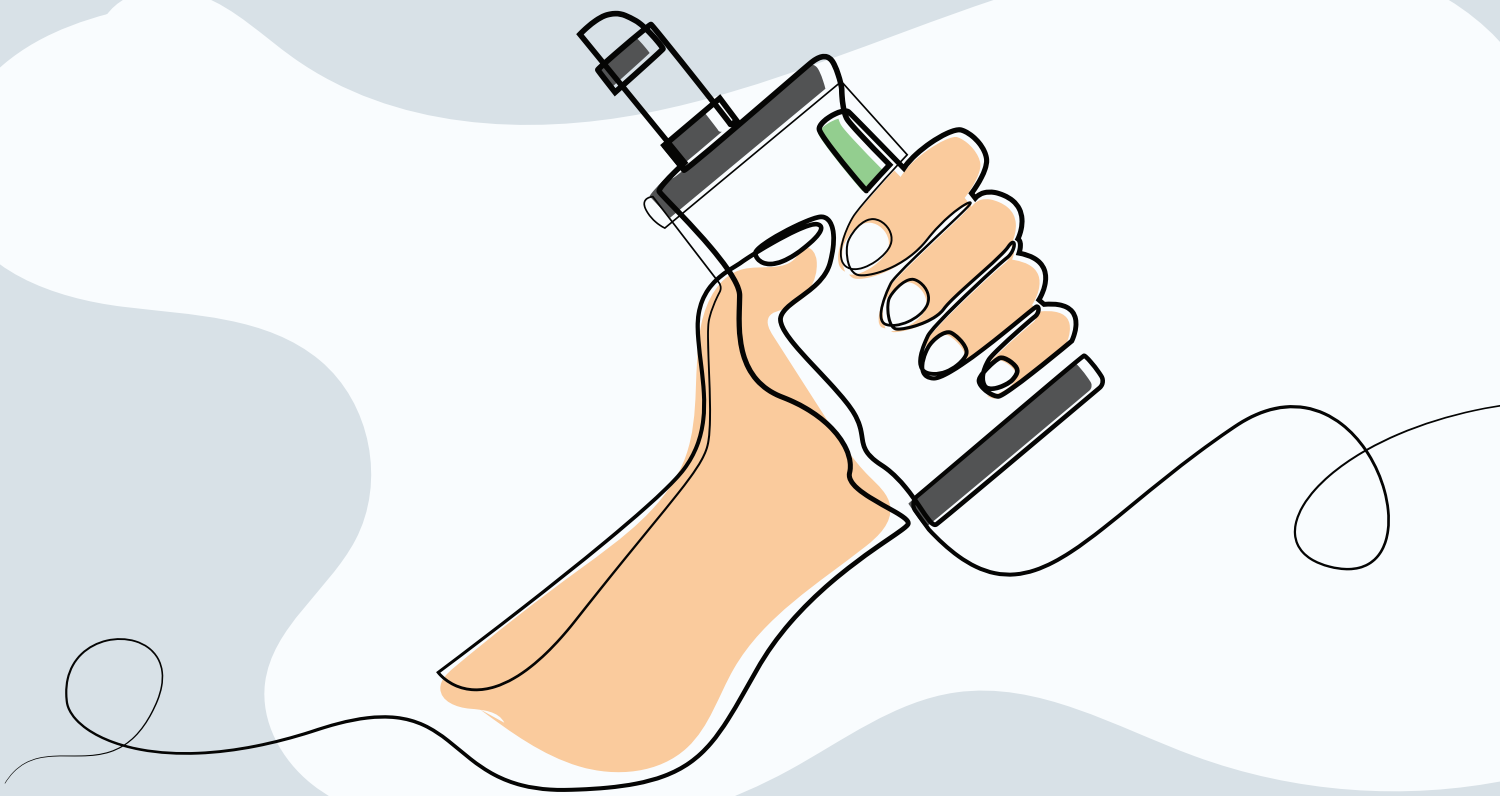
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hannah Carter is an experienced headteacher working for The Kemnal Academies Trust and author of the book, *The Honest Headteacher* (Teacher Writers, £12.99)



BREATHING SPACE

Dr Marc Picot highlights the growing seriousness of student vaping and offers some suggestions for what schools can do to tackle the problem



The findings of a recent survey conducted among British 11- to 17-year-olds by Ash (Action on Smoking and Health, the UK's leading anti-smoking public health charity) present a worrying picture. 20% of respondents stated they had tried vaping, amounting to an estimated 1.1 million. 7% (estimated to be around 400,000) currently vape regularly, with 40% of that group – an estimated 160k – vaping daily. The likelihood of vaping use increases with age; 12% of 16- to 17-year-olds currently vape, rising to 15% of 18-year-olds (see tinyurl.com/ts148-VP1).

A 2025 NASUWT survey further found that 85% of teachers consider vaping to be a significant issue on their premises. According to teachers, the situation has become so severe that 54%

believe they've seen students skipping lessons to vape, while the resultant effects of nicotine have left 35% witnessing students unable to focus in class (see tinyurl.com/ts148-VP2).

To combat this growing challenge, schools need support. Here, I want to highlight some anti-vaping resources and strategies, as well as some methods for creating a mindset that will help students avoid vaping in the first instance. With appropriate curriculum-based preventative education in place, and support available for children known to be vaping, your school can make real progress against the vaping crisis.

Vaping and its risks

The process of vaping sees users inhale an aerosol

loaded with harmful substances. The mix includes nicotine, heavy metals such as nickel and lead, and in the event of overheating, potentially traces of formaldehyde – a known cancer-causing chemical.

Overall, 20 chemicals are typically found in vape juice, increasing to as many as 60 once it's heated and inhaled. Even worse, recent media reporting suggests that in some regions, vapes and liquids used in schools have been found to contain the illicit synthetic substance spice (see tinyurl.com/ts148-VP3) or other drugs, such as ketamine and MDMA.

Children are particularly vulnerable to unregulated and harmful vape products, since they will often seek to obtain vapes and vape juice from illicit sources, be they unscrupulous retailers, drug

dealers or online retailers operating via social media accounts. There are significant health concerns involved that extend beyond nicotine use alone.

Vaping and mental health

The human brain keeps developing until around the age of 25. Exposure to nicotine during these crucial years can damage the natural process of brain development, leaving long-term effects on an individual's attention span, ability to learn, moods and impulse control. Though the impacts are as yet unproven in the UK, other countries, including the US and Australia, have undertaken studies that found teens who vape were up to three times more likely to take up regular smoking.

Teens who vape daily will

almost certainly meet the criteria for addiction, with research having found links between vaping and higher rates of adolescent anxiety, depression and mood swings. Withdrawal from nicotine brings about irritability, anxiety, an inability to focus and strong cravings that can impact upon educational performance. There is also some (albeit weaker) evidence to suggest that being addicted to nicotine may increase an individual's chances of becoming addicted to illicit substances later in life.

What schools can do

Schools need to employ thoughtful planning and evidence-based approaches

to create anti-vaping materials that actually work.

Students in turn require resources that will inform them, but also get them involved in making a positive difference (see

'Resource Recommendations').

PSHE lessons, for one, provide an ideal venue in which to address issues around vaping, enabling students to hear information and develop skills that will help them make more informed decisions. The learning opportunities in PSHE curriculums mention vaping as early as KS2; broader substance-related learning then continues through KS3-5, enabling students to develop critical thinking skills with which to approach the mixed media messages they're likely to see regarding vaping.

Making resources available goes some way towards tackling the issue, but teachers also need proper support if they're to deliver learning around vaping with confidence. Ash can provide a range of guidance and resources for DSLs, PSHE coordinators and other staff

charged with the responsibility for developing their school's policies when it comes to vaping.

Parental involvement can be another major contributor to the effectiveness of school prevention programs. Schools can connect with more parents, more easily by offering educational materials in multiple languages, developing vaping guides and information materials specifically targeted at parents. The issue could also be raised at PTA meetings.

Many schools have found that simply making parents more aware of the risks of vaping risks can help to reduce its usage. At the very least, productive collaboration with parents can help your school's consistent anti-vaping messaging travel further.

Behaviour policies

Ensure that your school's behaviour policy specifically cites vaping as an unacceptable behaviour. Explain the consequences of vaping at school in the policy, but try to avoid setting automatic suspension as the only punishment for infraction. Reserve use of suspensions and exclusions for only the most serious or

repeated breaches, or instances where vaping is linked with multiple other instances of serious misconduct.

Common signs of vaping habits among students can include the taking of frequent bathroom breaks, sweet or fruity smells, frequent coughing, sudden changes in mood or concentration and repeat instances of truancy.

When you have reason to suspect one or more students of vaping, approach the subsequent conversation calmly, and with compassion. The main goal is to listen and understand what vaping gives them, and to not immediately adopt a punitive stance. Demonstrating a supportive, more open approach will help to build trust, and make it easier for students to talk to you and your colleagues honestly.

See this conversation first and foremost as an opportunity to help them make better choices, and to support them in quitting. Start by explaining how easy it is to become dependent on nicotine through vaping, and normalise this by pointing out how that's the case for adults, as well as children. Many young people won't be aware of just how addictive

vaping really is – especially when it's so often marketed as a 'safer' alternative to traditional smoking.

Make clear to students that they can always approach you with any concerns they might have around vaping. You can further encourage these relationships with students and bolster their support network by engaging with your school's counselling or pastoral support team.

Signposting to help

There are a range of resources available to children that can provide them with wellbeing support during the withdrawal phase, while also addressing some of the underlying social and psychological factors as to why they began vaping in the first place.

National organisations operating in this space include MIND (mind.org.uk) and the online counselling community Kooth (kooth.com). Other regional services may also be available in your local area that could be worth signposting students to.

UK schools currently face an unprecedented challenge with regards to the youth vaping epidemic. It is, however, possible for schools to tackle the issue by devising anti-vaping programs that combine evidence-based resources, curriculum integration and parental involvement.

A combined effort by students, teachers, and parents alike would produce the most effective results and protect our youth from the harm that is vaping.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Marc Picot is a vaping expert, registered GP, author of *The Last Puff: A Practical Guide to Quitting Vaping* for Good and creator of the Vape Escape mobile app (vapeescape.org.uk)

RESOURCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Different resources produced in multiple formats will stand a better chance of reaching students via different channels:

- ▶ Posters for school toilets, classrooms and noticeboards
- ▶ Electronic leaflets that can be shared with parents and carers via newsletters
- ▶ Animated films for PSHE lessons and assemblies
- ▶ Classroom presentations with accompanying teacher notes
- ▶ Interactive digital courses that students can engage with directly

A mix of formats like these will enable schools to deploy consistent anti-vaping messages throughout the learning environment.

TEAM SPIRIT

Nick Perchard explains how a learning programme funded by the Premier League uses students' love of football as a means to get them re-engaged with the routines and demands of school



Nick Perchard is director of community at the

Premier League, responsible for the Premier League's community-based outreach work and its accompanying strategies, policies and partnerships.

How did the Premier League Inspires programme first come about?

Premier League Inspires (PLI) is one of the national programmes we fund via the Premier League charitable fund. It started in 2019, building off of two programmes we'd been running prior to that – Premier League Enterprise (a programme aimed at developing entrepreneurship among secondary school students) and Premier League Works (an employability programme for young people).

The feedback we'd received from doing those was that there were growing issues among certain groups of young people who were struggling to engage at secondary school. Partly with regards to their behaviour, but also in relation to mental health challenges they were experiencing.

We wanted to develop a new programme that was more targeted and focused on disengaged young people who, due to multiple risk factors, were being prevented from reaching

their full potential. In practice, that included individuals at risk of exclusion or suspension, those with attendance concerns and looked after children. Our aim was to effectively engage in youth work within schools, for students struggling to remain within a traditional classroom environment.

We wanted to use active learning to try and develop these students' personal and social skills, wellbeing and ability to build relationships. Of course, six months after we started, COVID hit and everything changed.

Have those aims of the programme changed or evolved over the years?

Coming out of COVID, we found that the cohorts attending the schools that wanted us to work with had changed considerably. As your readers will be aware, the scale of the mental health challenge amongst young people increased dramatically, with many now struggling to be present within school at all.

What does a typical Premier League Inspires session look like?

PLI aims to add value to schools' existing capacity by organising weekly activities for small groups (typically six to seven young people) or on a one-to-one basis. Premier League club charities will reach

out to schools, identify young people who might benefit from the programme, assess their needs and then build a package around that.

There's a whole host of different activities that participants get involved in, including qualifications they can aim for in areas such as refereeing and sports leadership. We also set a national challenge each season, where young people are tasked with working in small groups to help tackle a specific issue. These challenges might involve addressing mental health needs within their local community, tackling discrimination or a whole host of other causes.

Ultimately, it's about using the power of the Premier League, our football clubs and football in general to engage young people in education. How can we use active learning to get young people working as a team, communicating more effectively and solving problems?

Because as an employer, we know that those are the kind of skills and attributes we want to see from young people entering the workplace. We'll try to establish a

framework with the schools we're working with to make sure that the young people's interests are being encouraged.

The programme's main strength, in my view, is how it enables our club staff to form relationships with young people that are



“How can we use active learning to get young people working as a team, communicating more effectively and solving problems?”

different to those between teachers and pupils, and more akin to youth workers and mentors.

How can schools get involved?

A club will typically approach the schools in their local area with the PLI offer, followed by discussions with those interested on whether said offer meets their needs,

and whether the club will be able to service that in the long term. We presently fund 54 professional club charities to deliver PLI, having increased that by nine this season. We intend to increase it again in 2026/27.

We try to ensure that PLI partnerships aren't just isolated, three-week programmes of 'fun stuff' but packages of long-term support for

those young people who need it. Even outside of PLI, there's a whole host of other activities that club charities are already engaged in. Many run 'hub school' programmes, whereby club staff may be based at local schools multiple times per week. Other clubs have formed effective relationships with combined authorities and other local organisations to create similar sorts of programmes for schools themselves.

So whilst PLI is our national programme, and one we're proud of, club charities have long been doing some incredible work. I'd encourage all schools to reach out to their nearest professional football club charity, because there are bound to be some great ways in which they can work together.

What kind of impact has the programme had thus far?

PLI was recently evaluated by Sheffield Hallam

University, which found that 92% of participating schools

said they'd seen improvements in pupils' behaviour, and 96% reporting increases in pupils' enjoyment during lessons,

The finding that I think is perhaps the most important, though, is the programme's

impact on school attendance. The evaluation found that 80% of schools said it had improved pupils' attendance, most notably amongst those deemed as 'persistently absent'. We know that there's a segment of young people who are very interested in football, so it would seem that simply having a football club be present within your school on a certain day will encourage them to be there.

If we can get young people into school, and use the programme to positively impact upon their experiences of what school can be, that opens up an 'in' for the brilliant teaching taking place across other lessons and activities – and will hopefully set those young people up on a great path towards future success.

Were you surprised by any of the findings in the Sheffield Hallam evaluation?

One surprise was discovering that over a third of schools had said the programme helped them with parental engagement. That wasn't something we'd set out to do, but was perhaps a product of parents just being interested and curious about a professional football club having a presence in their children's school. It was

interesting for us to observe, and obviously great for those schools wanting to ensure that parents are properly engaged in their young people's education.

Have there been any efforts at extending the appeal of PLI beyond young people with a pre-existing interest in football?

When we first started PLI, we didn't want it to be solely a programme for young people with potential behaviour issues who happened to be sporty. While we like to think that the programme definitely helps those groups, we wanted to also ensure that there was another 'hook' that could get young people engaged.

What we've found is that even for young people who aren't especially sporty, there's something appreciably different that happens when a professional football club starts to have an active presence in their school. Just seeing and recognising the brand of that club can be enough to get them interested.

When setting the programme's KPIs, we were clear that all clubs had to deliver specific girls-only provision too, so it's never just been about engaging young boys; it's about trying to help as many young people as possible.

Through doing that, we've heard from a number of young people how they didn't enjoy football before, but now do and are considering going to games. That's not necessarily what the programme is about, but still great to see as a by-product.

For more information about Premier League Inspires, visit tinyurl.com/ts148-PLI





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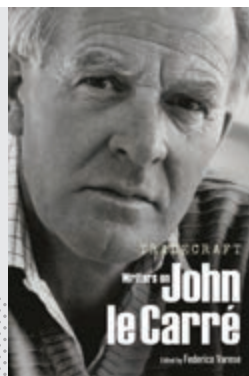


Seven Brief Lessons on Physics: Anniversary Edition

(Carlo Rovelli, Allen Lane, £10.99)

Rovelli draws readers into his world by describing the development of theories that scientists have posited to try and explain our world and the universe beyond. He does this by expressing his awe at the unseen reality behind our physical realm, and in so doing, entices others to take a similar interest themselves. Disappointingly, there appear to be few differences between this edition and Rovelli's original, published 10 years ago, with Rovelli's declarations that 'Exciting new ideas are in the process of being explored' leaving us wondering about the (presumed) discoveries that have emerged in the intervening decade. That aside, however, you could regard this book as a highly readable entry point to the study of physics – an intriguing taster of the main course.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman
bit.ly/Eclecticism

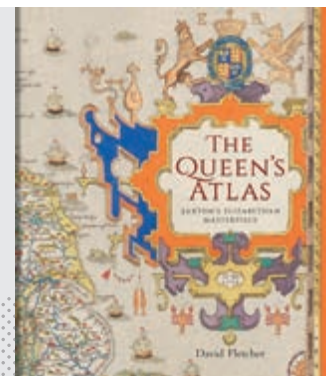


Tradecraft: Writers on John le Carré

(Federico Varese (ed.), Bodleian, £30)

Despite the title, this book is much more than a mere book of tips on the craft of writing. For one thing, we learn a great deal about le Carré's meticulous research process for his novels, which extended as far as visiting the places where they were set and reaching out to local experts and other contacts – hence the exquisite detail and sense of grounded realism readers came to expect from his writing. Beyond that, we also learn something of the international espionage, criminal exploits and corporate machinations that drove his plots, making this book a useful source for students of politics. Media studies students will likely find much of interest in a chapter on his novels' various screen adaptations, while English students and budding writers won't want to miss the descriptions of le Carré's working methods, complete with annotated typescripts. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman



The Queen's Atlas: Saxton's Elizabethan Masterpiece

(David Fletcher, Bodleian, £35)

In these days of Google Maps convenience being available at our fingertips, it's increasingly hard to imagine an era in which maps were either non-existent, or extremely rare artefacts available only to the very rich. In this beautifully illustrated book we learn about how William Saxton carried out the task of mapping the entirety of England (as far as can be surmised, at least), as well as the political and strategic roles maps have served over time. It's genuinely difficult to conceive of an age in which it didn't occur to most people to even want access to maps, but it turns out Henry VIII was a key driving force in promoting their usefulness. A highly detailed account packed with fascinating insights that will be of particular interest to geography students.

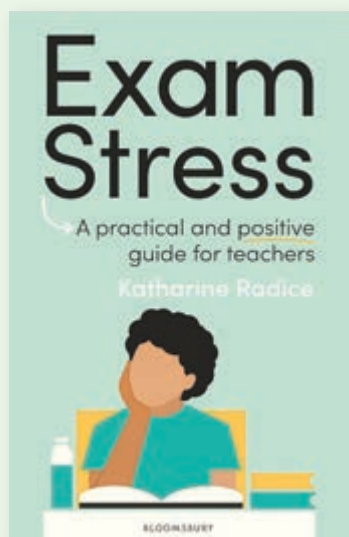
Reviewed by Terry Freedman

ON THE RADAR

Exam Stress*(Katharine Radice, Bloomsbury Education, £20)*

GCSE exams – and O Levels before them – have always been that last, big challenge that students must face before leaving school behind for good. Yet there's a prevailing sense that in 2025, the exams in question have become more intensive, that the stakes involved are higher than ever – and that many students today are finding it harder to cope with what the GCSE exam process as a whole demands of them.

In the straightforwardly titled *Exam Stress*, Katharine Radice attempts to make those often nebulous concerns around students' attitudes towards exams more concrete by unpacking the specific causes of exam stress, drawing on research from the fields of neuroscience, psychology and adolescent development. Readers after a searing critique of the exam system as it stands should look elsewhere, however. Radice is nothing if not thorough in her survey of factors both internal (the workings of the brain, behaviours, personal habits) and external (social media, pressure from family) that can lead students to see exams as insurmountable obstacles, but this is no angry polemic. It's a clear-eyed diagnosis of where we are, with a series of practical suggestions for strategies, approaches and ways of talking about exams that can help students feel better, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes.



Meet the author

PATRICK COZIER

The book is strikingly honest – did you discuss what you wanted to include with your colleagues?

I had a certain amount of freedom when writing it, since most of the events and people I talk about are in the past – but yes, how the book would be received by governors and parents at the school now was a constant consideration. In the end, the only person really 'exposed' by what's in the book is myself. I don't mind being open about my thought processes – my SLT know that if I've got a decision to make, I'm prepared to sometimes say 'I don't know if this is going to work.'

There are often so many moving pieces involved that you can only ever do what you think is right. We headteachers need to free ourselves from this belief that we're supposed to know everything and somehow predict every outcome. It's simply not true, and I don't mind being open about that.

How different are the challenges confronting headteachers now, compared to 2006, when you first assumed headship?

In terms of leading people, I don't think the role's changed. The need to keep everybody together, the importance of consistent messaging and a unified purpose, that's all still there. What's different now are the external factors.

Ofsted has always been a challenge, and increasingly so, for reasons that are well-documented. Accountability has increased over the years, and the ways in which schools are pitted against each other with league tables and such has made a huge difference.

If your book had a single message about headship, what would it be?

That school leadership can be a job that ends in burnout, but it doesn't have to be. I'm someone who's been in the job for 19 years and still enjoying it, and a living example of the fact that it doesn't have to wear you out, or make you old and cynical. The difficulties I describe in the book date back to an early period of my headship, at the point where many leaders will be weighing up whether to continue – but you can push through that, change how you approach the job emotionally and recognise that it's difficult because it's supposed to be.

If you go in expecting that difficulty, then you won't feel at fault when problems inevitably arise. It'll always be hard, but you can make it feel easier over time by adopting the right kind of mindset.

Patrick Cozier is headteacher at Highgate Wood School, Haringey, a member of the Headteacher's Roundtable and a trustee of the national charity Show Racism the Red Card

**Vermeer: A Life Lost and Found***(Andrew Graham-Dixon, Allen Lane, £30)*

Graham-Dixon does an excellent job here of conveying his original and archival research into the life of Johannes Vermeer, with the Dutch artist and his works carefully considered in the context of the time and place in which he lived. Graham Dixon is well-known for his analysis of paintings in terms of their allegorical significance, and duly picks up on a whole host of small details which certainly I, and I suspect many others would hardly notice after detailed study, never mind at first glance. That said, some of his suggestions, critiques and assertions can seem like a bit of a stretch at times. Are we really to believe, for example, that a distinctly unbiblical figure is, in fact, meant to represent Mary Magdalene? Quibbles aside, however, there's plenty of nourishing food for thought to be found in this sumptuously illustrated book. Recommended.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

**Calm Leadership***(Patrick Cozier, Crown House Publishing, £18.99)*

We've seen a number of titles penned by serving headteachers over the years that are effectively part memoir, part practical guide – but not many that are as admirably frank about the brutal levels of difficulty and self-doubt that come with the job as *Calm Leadership*. Cozier is an engaging writer, and not afraid to take readers deep inside the deliberations and uncertainties experienced by a headteacher getting to grips with the demands of the role. That said, the book's overall narrative is much more concerned with how headteachers can become better, and ultimately succeed – and given Cozier's 19-year (and counting) continuous stint as leader of Highgate Wood School, his perspective is one that's worth paying attention to. The 'calm' of the title may be an acronym for a leadership model that readers are invited to try out for themselves, the inspirational quotes at the start of each chapter are present and correct – but in all other respects, this is a book about and for headteachers that stands apart from the rest.

WHY I LOVE...

ABOUT US:

St George's School is a non-selective day and boarding school for learners aged 11-18, located in Harpenden, Hertfordshire



TALKING ABOUT: HACHETTE LEARNING'S ART & AMT ASSESSMENTS

How do you use the tests?

At St George's School, we've found the ART and AMT interactive assessments to be useful tools, particularly for screening students in Y9. We also use the paper versions for individual in-year entries and for interventions.

What impact have they had?

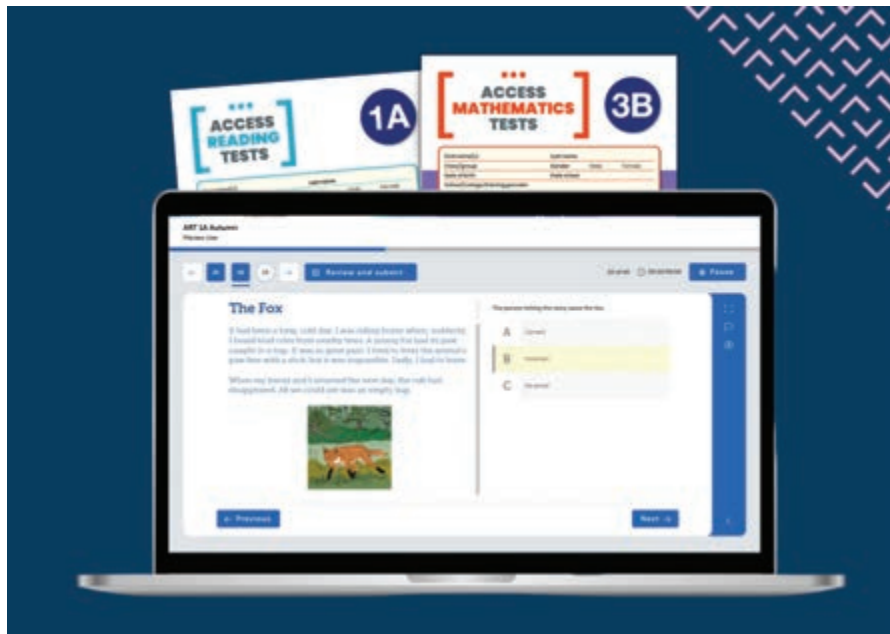
Using ART and AMT tests to screen Y9 has been very helpful. This gives us a consistent assessment point and useful information between the key stages. It helps address any concerns from parents, too. We don't share detailed results with students or parents, but we do communicate whether students' reading and maths test results are in line with expectations for their age.

We use the assessments to support access arrangements as part of our assessor evidence. The standardised scores, reading and maths ages are helpful indicators. If a student is performing significantly below age expectations, then we investigate further using additional assessments.

What has the process been like?

The online versions of the tests are very straightforward to use, and save time on marking. This year we ran the online assessments in our computer suites during timetabled computing lessons and distributed the links via Google Classroom. While the process is generally smooth, monitoring can be more difficult than in the school hall, where we would do the paper tests with students

Ann Fitzgerald, assessments officer and learning support manager at St George's School, discusses the impact of Access Reading and Mathematics Tests



Contact:
hachettelearning.com/consultants

sat further apart from each other. The ease of the online tests providing results immediately, though, probably outweighs this concern, and we are aware that we'll have to monitor some students carefully.

[The reporting platform is] easy to navigate, and syncing with SIMS was straightforward. Adding any additional students manually was also easy, as was allocating extra time within the online test time for those who needed it. We haven't needed to contact Hachette's digital support, but we did use the online help pages for a step-by-step guide to downloading the reports into Excel.

Would you recommend the tests?

ART and AMT are amongst my favourite tests for effectiveness, and if budget allows, I will be considering extending the screening to more year groups. Based on our experience, I would recommend both ART and AMT tests to other schools.

WILL IT WORK FOR YOU?

- Print or digital tests measure skills and identify areas of improvement
- Compare learners against cohort at a school and national level
- Parallel assessments measure progress and the impact of targeted teaching
- Next-step interventions available, driven by ART/AMT results

The accountability theatre

Why Ofsted's much-vaunted 'quick fixes' won't fix what's really broken...

Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats for tonight's performance of *Accountability Theatre!*

On stage, the role of the government is played by the over-eager understudy who mistakes shouting for acting. Ofsted is portrayed by the cast member who skipped rehearsals, but still insists on taking centre stage. The scenery consists of garish cardboard cut-outs – shiny enough to distract, flimsy enough to collapse under the slightest scrutiny.

The house lights dim. The orchestra strikes up and we're invited to suspend our disbelief, but the audience already knows all the lines. Teachers, leaders and pupils have sat through this play before. And they know exactly how it ends.

Same old show

The government's announcement of sweeping changes to Ofsted's accountability was billed as being intended to reduce the climate of fear within schools. Yet as the curtain rises, it's become clear that this is just the same old show, slightly rearranged.

What leaps out most is the speed of it all. From proposals to implementation, the turnaround has been dizzyingly quick – too quick for meaningful rehearsal, or for the profession's voices to shape the narrative. It's not the speed of confidence, so much as panic; a frantic attempt to placate critics and reassure the press. Teachers have been relegated to playing mere background roles, waiting for lines that never arrive.



This is all especially painful when considering Ruth Perry. Her death should have prompted a wholesale rewrite of the accountability script. Instead, it's been treated as a momentary tragedy that politicians will invoke for pathos. A life reduced to symbol, rather than a catalyst. That's not change. That's spectacle.

Audience dissent

These reforms promised lighter burdens, more fairness and greater trust, but beneath the monologues lie the same tired tropes. Schools will still be judged by data-heavy frameworks that leave little space for nuance while the real issues – underfunding, staff shortages, ballooning workloads – go barely acknowledged. This isn't accountability as a form of support. It's a sword waved menacingly above the cast.

And what of the claim that this government has 'listened to teachers'? True listening means letting the profession

shape the script, yet the hurried rollout suggests that this play was written some time ago, with token pauses left in for audience feedback. No wonder reports are suggesting that nine out of ten heads support taking industrial action over the current reforms. That level of dissent isn't a heckle from the stalls. It's a full walkout.

Too much energy has been spent on tinkering with grading criteria, rebranding reports and adjusting inspection parameters. Things that are easy to quote and simple to present as progress. What remains unseen is the staff exhaustion, the erosion of support for vulnerable pupils and steady, unchecked exit of teachers from the stage.

Accountability itself isn't the villain here. Every production needs structure. But when inspections are treated as the finale, rather than as part of an ensemble, the performance becomes distorted. Schools end up rehearsing 'Ofsted-friendly' lines, rather than focusing

on what genuinely matters for their students.

Empty echoes

Without tackling those deep-rooted issues – funding, staffing, workload, wellbeing – these reforms won't change the lived experience of teachers or pupils. And without that change, all those speeches from the stage will amount to little more than echoes in an empty theatre.

What we're presently witnessing is *Accountability Theatre* – performed in haste, applauded in Westminster, but hollow at its core. Following Ruth Perry's death, we should be seeing a more substantive set of changes that honour the humanity of those working in schools every day.

So let's stop performing these inspection rituals and start building a system that's rooted in trust, support and sustainability. Because otherwise, Ofsted's accountability will remain as something to be endured, rather than something that can empower.

We've previously seen Ofsted eventually come to do the right thing, but only after they've tried every other act in their repertoire. By the time they get there this time, the audience may have already left the theatre.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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Opening up the CONVERSATION

Mubina Asaria highlights the ways in which schools can support parents with matters of online safety

In today's digital age, protecting students from online harms requires a genuine partnership between school and home. Parents are the first line of defence when it comes to online safety, but often left out of the online safeguarding conversation.

This can result from barriers that include the confidence levels of school staff, and the ability of parents to keep up with the fast-changing app environment and attendant risks – as well as the fact that such conversations will often touch on sensitive topics such as recommended screen time, smartphone use, bullying and potential exposure to sexual content.

Children's online lives are complex and ever-evolving, with new risks frequently emerging alongside new platforms and the latest trends. According to a 2025 report published by Ofcom (see tinyurl.com/ts148-OS1), 55% of children below the age of 13 use at least one social media app or site. Between 2023 to 2024, Instagram use among 8- to 9-year-olds rose from 8% to 14%. A third of 8- to 17-year-olds admit to

having submitted a fake age in order to access certain apps and websites. Up to a quarter have changed their date of birth after setting up a social media profile, with 8- to 12-year-olds the group most likely to do this so that they can access Snapchat.

Why a drip-feed approach is best

When it comes to raising parents' awareness of online safety issues, a drip-feed approach – where short presentations are incorporated into other school events, such as coffee mornings, parents evenings and celebration days – will likely be more successful than holding yearly or termly standalone sessions.

Co-presenting these with students can be especially effective, since students can provide parents with an 'insider' view by sharing their own first-hand experiences and knowledge of the latest online trends.

Families should be kept informed with clear and consistent communications, be that via regular newsletters, parent portals or dedicated messaging apps. Parents may not always

understand the latest risks around gaming, social media, generative AI and so forth, so make sure all communications are kept largely free of jargon, and made as accessible and practical as possible so that parents can develop confidence in speaking to their children.

Explaining online trends in simple and relatable terms, while sharing easy-to-use guides and resources, will help families continue those important conversations at home. Always use trusted sources for any resources and support materials, such as the NSPCC, Childnet or Internet Matters, and avoid overwhelming families with an excess of information.

Reporting policies

Adopting a joined-up approach is essential when safeguarding concerns arise, so encourage a two-way dialogue in which parents feel heard and involved. Reinforce your (hopefully clear) procedures for reporting issues, whether they occur inside or outside the classroom. IT monitoring systems may be able to instantly alert staff to some potential risks, but timely and sensitive communication with parents is ultimately the most crucial step towards ensuring that any concerns are acted on quickly and appropriately.

By the same token, parents should receive help on how to spot early warning signs of online harms at home, and be given the knowledge of how best to respond.

Tools and confidence

The most effective safeguarding approaches emerge when schools and

homes are aligned. Your school policies should reflect the same principles being shared with parents, with both sides modelling the safe and responsible use of technology. By celebrating positive digital behaviour together, and framing safeguarding around *empowerment* rather than *fear*, schools can build a culture of trust and genuine partnership with their students' families.

To help with this, the edtech charity LGfL-the National Grid for Learning has developed a free 'Parent Online Safety Toolkit' (parentonlinesafety.lgfl.net), which combines the latest research on young people's online use and risks with useful tips, conversation starters and resources for parents. The resource can help families stay up to date with new trends, apps and games, manage their home internet settings and controls, and talk to their children about issues such as bullying, image sharing, AI chatbots, screen time, and staying safe from exploitation and grooming.

Together, schools and families can form an online safety net that will ensure concerns are picked up early, responses are swift and children are supported both at home and in the classroom.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mubina Asaria is safeguarding consultant at LGfL - The National Grid for Learning; for more information, visit lgfl.net



The art of WELLBEING

It's possible – albeit while exercising caution – to take inspiration from art therapy and create powerful art lessons that promote wellbeing, writes **Alice Guile**

Our young people are under more pressure than ever before. According to the youth mental health charity Young Minds, 1 in 6 children aged 5 to 16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021 – a huge increase from 1 in 9 back in 2017.

That amounts to an average of five children having a probable mental health problem in every classroom. Such a steep increase over just four years can be in part attributed to the COVID 19 pandemic – but whatever the causes, it's become evident that many students are struggling with their mental health, which in turn puts extra pressure on education staff.

Self-awareness and empathy

Art has long been recognised for its therapeutic benefits, and has often been used to help individuals manage and navigate a wide range of personal difficulties. Whilst proper art therapy should only ever be practised by licenced professionals, teachers can still take some inspiration from art therapy techniques and apply them to their classroom practice.

My own initial foray into art therapy-inspired lesson planning involved designing a scheme of work that combined self-awareness with empathy. I carried this out with my Y7 and Y8 students, but it's simple enough to potentially do with primary school children as well.

We began by looking at examples of abstract art via a PowerPoint presentation, including Henri Matisse's 'The Snail', and discussed how abstract art is often *expressing* what they've observed, rather than *copying* or *reproducing* what they've observed.

I then gave the students a printed sheet showing a

series of boxes, each labelled with a specific emotion, and asked them to use what they understood of abstract art to create an image depicting each emotion. The activity was accompanied by some background music – a selection of classical pieces I'd chosen beforehand that were evocative of the different emotions the students were exploring.

I periodically asked the students how the music made them feel, and what colours the music made them think of. (We engaged in some brief guided meditation during the first and last few minutes of the lessons, to encourage calmness.)

Next, I asked the students to draw an outline of their own body on a separate piece of paper, and think about which three emotions they felt most often. This step was designed to encourage self-awareness and self-reflection, both of which are hugely important to the mindfulness process.

'Emotion self-portraits'

When promoting wellbeing, it's important that students are able to recognise and express what they're feeling. I therefore made a point of asking the students to all reflect on *why* they might feel those particular emotions more than any others.

Inside the body outline, I asked the students to depict – again, using their

intelligence, the students proceeded to select three emotions that they thought their partner might feel most often, and drew *those* inside of a body outline. As before, they were required to write notes about why the other person might feel those things.

At the end of the lesson we talked more about why it was important for us deal with strong feelings in healthy ways – such as talking them through with someone else, or expressing them via art or other creative pursuits, such as music or drama.

What makes a 'creative person'?

This isn't the only art therapy and wellbeing-inspired teaching I've done. In another lesson, I took the unusual step of presenting students with a blank piece of paper and letting them draw whatever they wanted.

This admittedly followed a group discussion we'd had at the start of the lesson, in which we talked about what it is that makes a 'creative person'. Sadly, none of the students present were willing to describe themselves as such – so we tried to get to the bottom of why that was.

Their responses mainly revolved around them thinking that their ideas weren't of any value. The lack of confidence they displayed was astounding to me, and disappointing. I told them that they could spend the remainder of the lesson drawing whatever they wanted to because their ideas *were* of value – and because I was keen to see what was inside their heads.

“The purpose of the lesson wasn't to create 'perfect' artworks, but to generate ideas”

understanding of abstract art – their three most common emotions. They were then tasked with labelling their drawings and writing about why they picked those particular emotions at the bottom of the page. As they did so, I walked around the classroom, encouraging some individual students to discuss the emotions they had chosen and why.

This process led to some interesting conversations. It can be helpful for students to be open about their feelings, and to internalise the idea that it's good to talk about emotions. I described the pictures as 'emotion self-portraits'.

The next stage was for the students to pick another person and create an emotion portrait of them (while being encouraged to *not* pick their best friend). After a class discussion in which we talked about the meaning and importance of empathy, and the concept of emotional

Throughout, I made it clear to them that the purpose of the lesson wasn't to create 'perfect' artworks, but to generate *ideas*; that so long as they at least tried to express some original thoughts, they would have done the work.

Screwing up the work

My students mostly seemed to enjoy this, though some

did struggle with a lack of ideas and needed some help with suggestions. At the end of the lesson I encouraged the students to talk about what they'd done, but this was met with mixed success. Some students screwed their work up and described it as '*no good*' – even when I'd praised it during the lesson.

I've since considered the

possibility that those students who screwed their work up, or who didn't want to show what they'd done because they thought it wasn't all that good, might have struggled with their self-esteem.

However, given how important it can be for teachers to understand which of their students struggle

with self-esteem the most, I still found the exercise to have been very helpful. Among those who *did* want to show their work, I asked them questions about what they had chosen to draw, and encouraged them to think of positive things they could say about other people's work.

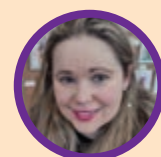
Uncovering the uncomfortable

In all, I'd say I'm pleased with the results of my attempts to create art lessons that promote empathy, emotional intelligence and wellbeing, and would highly recommend taking inspiration from art therapy to other teachers.

I would, however, caution against using specific therapeutic techniques – my own lesson activities were inspired by art therapy in the broadest sense – since art therapy can uncover some painful things. Art therapists are, after all, licenced professionals trained at dealing with clients expressing their most painful memories. Teachers, needless to say, are not.

During a subsequent lesson with some older students about surrealism, Lucien Freud and the subconscious, a member of the class drew something that was so alarming it had to be reported as a safeguarding concern immediately after the lesson concluded.

When working within the space where art meets emotion, you may have to prepare yourself for the possibility that you could uncover some uncomfortable things. That said, I hope some readers will feel sufficiently inspired to consider trying out some of these ideas in their own classrooms.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Guile is a secondary school art teacher



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- ✓ They make teaching that little bit easier.

Of course, every school is different – what works brilliantly in one setting might need tweaking in another. But we hope these winners give you a taste of what's possible, and plenty of inspiration to make your teaching even more rewarding.

HOW IT WORKED

1 ENTRIES OPENED

Companies submitted their best resources

2 SHORTLISTS CREATED

We grouped the standouts by category

3 EXPERT JUDGING

Educators put every entry through its paces

4 WINNERS CHOSEN

Winner & two highly commended per category

WHAT JUDGES ASSESSED

Judges carefully evaluated each resource against key criteria (below) to recognise outstanding quality, impact and innovation...

- **Suitability & adaptability**
- **Educational impact**
- **Originality & innovation**
- **Value for money**
- **Ease of use & accessibility**
- **Durability**
- **Environmental impact**

CATEGORIES & JUDGES

CPD

Training, books or software that help teachers grow and develop professionally



Dr Chris Baker, CPD leader, Cabot Learning Federation

CURRICULUM IMPROVEMENT

Resources that support curriculum subject teaching – in class or at home



Nikki Cunningham-Smith, assistant headteacher

EDTECH AND SOFTWARE

Devices, apps and software that enhance learning or support school-wide systems



Kit Betts-Masters, lead practitioner for science and content creator

FREE RESOURCE

Print or digital resources that are completely free for secondary schools



Anthony David, executive headteacher and author based in London

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Materials that support RSE, safeguarding and students' mental health and wellbeing



Ann Marie Christian, safeguarding & child protection expert

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Students can use the unit's built-in camera and accelerometer to gather visual and motion data, and connect sensors for measuring temperature, humidity or sound via USB/GPIO to

create interdisciplinary datasets. Via the UNIIKER K10's edge connectors and Gravity I/O interface, students can easily connect and control additional digital/analog sensors, I2C/UART actuators and other assorted peripherals, making for a complete 'Internet of Things' (IoT) solution without requiring any additional hardware.

The UNIIKER K10 integrates TinyML technology for local data processing, as well as real-time inference without cloud dependency, thus empowering students to build smart, offline systems that are compatible with plug-and-play sensors – a marked contrast with comparable browser-based tools.

The UNIIKER K10 comes with four vision AI models pre-installed (for human faces, cats/dogs, QR codes and motion detection), allowing students to easily start exploring the visual recognition tasks that AI can potentially be used for. Pre-installed voice models are also included, making the UNIIKER K10



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capable of offline speech recognition with the aid of the aforementioned built-in microphone.

Taken together, the UNIIKER K10 is the perfect tool for students embarking on IoT design projects, scientific investigations and other hands-on learning projects. There's even onboard support for graphical and MicroPython programming languages, making it a suitable tool for use by students working at different skill levels.

For more information regarding the potential applications of the UNIIKER K10, visit dfrobot.com



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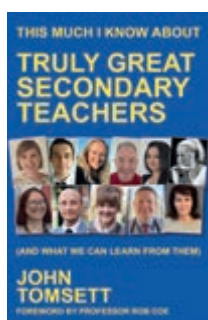
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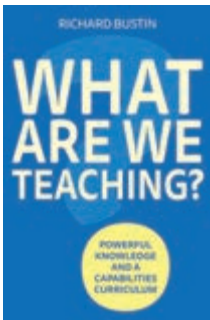
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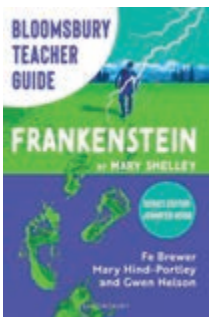
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**What Are We Teaching?**

by Richard Bustin (Crown House Publishing)

A book that invites teachers to consider why their subject specialism is important as part of a whole school curriculum vision, and a provides language with which to articulate that.

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**Bloomsbury Teacher Guide: Frankenstein**

by Fe Brewer, Mary Hind-Portley and Gwen Nelson (Bloomsbury Publishing)

An exciting, research-informed teaching guide that offers new insights into the text, covering style and language, the Gothic genre and feminist readings.

“I feel like you couldn’t go wrong with this comprehensive guide – so many wonderful teaching opportunities and directions that really get to the heart of the text.”

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FINALISTS

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Questions can be selected algorithmically, so that weaker areas are revisited until they stick, with live dashboards clearly showing at a glance who’s thriving and who needs help.

“The link between getting a question incorrect, and being directed instantly to a resource that can help re-learn and consolidate, will prove invaluable for learners.”

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(BBC)

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"The combination of guests and topics make for discussions that are ideal for engaging younger minds with important subjects"



Health Education Drugs and Alcohol Resources

(Hope UK)

With drug education now part of the compulsory Health Education national curriculum, Hope UK has used its expertise to develop a set of lesson plans, activities, PowerPoint presentations and resources for teachers to use with their students.

"A very useful and cost-effective resource, with lots of accessible information for learners and educators alike."

What can we learn from people who prove others wrong?

Ellie Goldstein, a 23-year-old model from Ilford, has been announced as a contestant on Strictly Come Dancing. She is the first person with Down's syndrome to take part in a full series of the show, having already made history as the first model with Down's syndrome to appear on the cover of British Vogue. Ellie says she's excited for the challenge and hopes to show that people can do amazing things, even when others don't expect them to.

Learn more about this week's story [here](#).
Watch this week's useful video [here](#).

Source: BBC Photo Archives



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(Jigsaw
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(Picture News)

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“A child-friendly platform that enables schools to discuss and debate global and local issues of the moment via an easy to navigate and accessible website.”

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(Educational Recording Agency)

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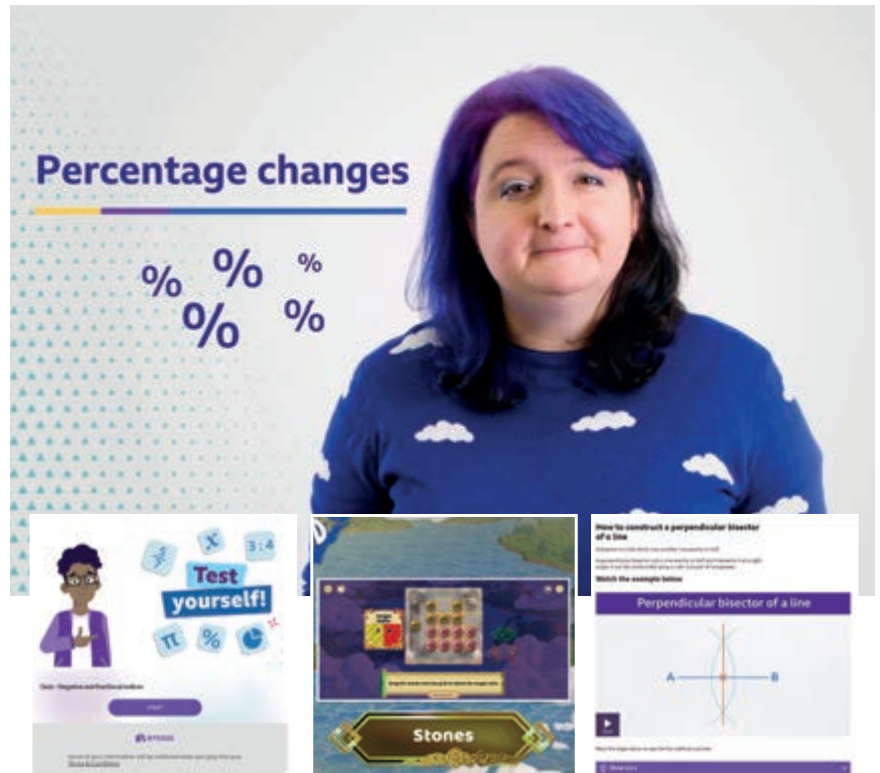


Experience AI

(Raspberry Pi Foundation)

An educational programme offering resources on artificial intelligence and machine learning for students aged 11 to 14. Developed in collaboration by the Raspberry Pi Foundation and Google DeepMind, it can get young people passionate about the topic.

“The lessons are well thought through and considered. There are very few organisations producing AI resources like this.”



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(1851 Marine Trust)

KS4 GREEN CAREERS, ENDEAVOUR CHALLENGE
(Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew)

CLASSROOM REVIVR
(British Heart Foundation)

WINNER

BBC Bitesize GCSE Maths

(BBC)

Maths-based content from BBC Bitesize for students in England, Northern Ireland or Wales aligned to six different exam boards. The content on offer includes exam-style quiz and quick-fire questioning activities, guidance on how to use past papers effectively, downloadable flashcards and explanatory videos – plus the popular maths

game Divided Islands (pictured). The game links to relevant topic areas, and lets students play fun minigames themed around multiple areas, or focused on discrete key maths topics for short intervals, depending on their preference.

“The strength of this resource is that it is very easy to access, with resources that support learning in a fun and creative way.”

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FOCUS ON: SEND

A closer look at what Ofsted wants to see from schools in terms of 'inclusion'; what remote learning can do to make lessons more accessible; and the communication essentials that some teachers can miss...

How should we ensure that teaching and learning can be accessed by all students, whatever their particular needs and requirements?

THE AGENDA:

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Checks and balances

Meena Wood looks at whether Ofsted's recent focus on 'inclusion' will make a substantive difference to the learning and wellbeing of children with SEND...

If we don't listen to the children our education system treats as 'outliers', causing them to 'fail' their exams at 16, how inclusive should we consider that system to be? 'SEND' pupils are disproportionately more likely than their peers to be persistently absent from classrooms, suspended or excluded for poor behaviour. At the same time, little if any analysis exists of why they miss school so often, or fail to gain a Level 4 GCSE, despite them having frequently received appropriate interventions, or in some cases, mandated EHCP support.

Demotivated children

Bizarrely, for a government that supposedly places so much stock in data, it seems staggeringly short-sighted for the DfE to not even ask pupils precisely why they don't attend school, or aren't 'ready to learn'. Instead, there are just yet more 'Ambassadors for Behaviour' and 'Attendance Hubs' – palliative sticking plasters, at best.

As a former HMI, schools adviser and headteacher, I would regularly interrogate school data for persistently absent children, and pose that question of 'Why?' to them directly. Some felt unsupported with conditions such as ADHD, or dyslexia. For others, it was down to a pace of learning that was too fast, or because 'They weren't good at the subject' (those subjects usually being maths, English or science).

Other reasons would include suspensions for uniform infractions, or disruptive behaviours because they were not helped

in addressing existing gaps in their knowledge. Some felt that certain subjects (French, for instance) were simply irrelevant to them.

I've previously spoken to SEND students struggling to learn by rote, and fed up of being compared to their non-SEND peers in terms of assessment outcomes. They felt like failures – especially those Y9s already predicted as attaining 3s in their eventual English and maths GCSEs.

“Inspectors and schools alike must develop a common understanding of inclusion”

The problems they were having essentially hinged on what they were learning and how they were being assessed. Even children with an EHCP – who you assume would be ably supported – appeared to be not making the progress they were capable of. These demotivated children 'knew' they would fail their GCSEs. For them, the die had already been cast.

Flexible accreditation

It's therefore interesting to read the key recommendations put forward by the Youth Shadow Panel – a youth-led initiative operating in parallel with the government's Curriculum and Assessment Review. The Youth Shadow Panel's report (see shadowpanel.uk) describes the GCSE as a 'closed-book' exam that may contribute to "Disabled and neurodiverse students becoming unable to fulfil their academic potential."

That advice has been

echoed by the Education Select Committee. Its recently published 'Solving the SEND Crisis' report recommended that "*The curriculum must be flexible, relevant and reflect the representation of young people with SEND; and the government must ensure the curriculum itself and the assessment of it reflect and accommodate their needs.*" (see tinyurl.com/ts148-IN1)

Adopting flexible accreditation in schools

would create a more equitable system. In place of a normative, one-size-fits-all assessment, there could be a range of motivational opportunities, including project-based and continuous assessment, such as in the International Baccalaureate.

Ongoing progress could be measured against a framework of skills and knowledge-based competencies – something that's commonplace in many other countries. Skills-based accreditation (such as ASDAN and ESB Oracy qualifications) are effective at recording success milestones, and have been shown to work successfully for all children, but are currently only used at a school leadership's discretion.

The end goal

The mandated EHCP could be used more wisely. Scheduled staff planning time could be earmarked for teachers, TAs and core subject teachers, so that

SEND students in, say, KS3 can be taught in smaller groups. Children with identified needs could even start to receive elements of the support they require without delay, while waiting for EHCPs to be awarded – currently a major weakness under the present legal framework.

Instead of working in silos, the government's Inclusion Task Force, Attendance and Behaviour Ambassadors could collaborate on devising better inclusive education strategies. Why not task these individuals with setting up focus groups of disengaged children, and questioning them on how school could better meet their needs?

The end goal must be to engage all students in their learning, so that they actually enjoy school. This might involve looking at current behaviour and attendance approaches, as well as uniform guidelines. Shifting to a more adaptive



curriculum would facilitate learning based on need and pace, rather than Key Stage or age, and afford more opportunities for every child to fulfil their potential.

And while we're at it – mandatory training for TAs and teachers on how to adapt their teaching for students with SEND is a core feature of ITT within the Singapore education system. Why not replicate that here?

Stereotypes and vagueness

So how exactly will Ofsted evaluate 'inclusion'? The definitions of 'SEND' and 'barriers' in its latest Education Inspection Framework and accompanying guidance (see tinyurl.com/ts148-IN2) seem noticeably vague. As a former HMI National Lead for Equalities, I find that concerning.

Does 'SEND' include only those students with identified needs, those receiving support or intervention, or those with mandated EHCPs? Will inspectors have received sufficient training in seeking out unidentified needs during observations? Because it's these kinds of analyses that should form the core of a genuinely inclusive inspection practice.

It would seem that Ofsted has learnt few lessons from its previous foci on other pupil groups. Prior inspector training on 'race equality', for example, was implemented with specific guidance, exemplars of good report writing and school case studies of best practice. The training materials were based on inspection reports and 'good practice' thematic surveys from across the pre- and post-16 sectors, emphasising the need for relevant, contextual language over bland report writing, stereotypes and vagueness.

That would mean replacing a statement like, *"All pupils, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities, or from minority ethnic backgrounds make progress at similar rates,"* with the following: *"Effective language support and participation in creative subjects helps students at early stages of learning English become part of the school community, accelerating their language skills."*

Triangulate with data

Inspectors could, on occasion, expect to have challenging conversations with schools where uncomfortable truths are aired. In one school I

inspected, for instance, a pattern of data spanning three years (backed by pupils' experiences) indicated that Black Caribbean pupils had received a disproportionate number of exclusions and suspensions, with over one third of that group identified as having SEND.

At another school, children told inspectors that they didn't report racist bullying *'For fear of not being listened to'*. Through a sensitive use of data, however, the inspectors did also evidence some successful inclusion strategies, including a use of peer mentors that had led to reductions in bullying and suspensions, and progress in early English acquisition.

Inspectors and schools alike must develop a common understanding of inclusion, and a willingness to share accurate data on admissions, progress and exclusions. Above all, there needs to be agreement on what good practice looks like.

Ofsted's new 'Inclusion' grade references the 2010 Equality Act, which covers nine protected characteristics, including ethnicity. SEND pupils, children known to social care and those who 'may face other barriers' have now become a core focus of

WHERE'S THE DATA?

It's worth remembering how, back in 2019, senior Ofsted leaders inexplicably prevented inspectors from accessing data gathered by the Analyse School Performance (ASP) service.

This data provided insightful starting points for discussions with senior school leaders, and was signposted in a school's self-evaluation against key evidence. If this injunction stays, inspectors will continue to implement the new framework while effectively blindfolded, basing their judgements on one-and-a-half days of observations and conversations with just a handful of school staff and children.

inspections, alongside a shift in expectations for schools to meet every student's needs and be accountable for their SEND provision.

For all that, though, the act of actually listening to what children have to say has been at the heart of inclusive education. With schools currently under no obligation to share their own internal data, how can inspectors expect to verify every child's sense of belonging within learning communities in which everyone is meant to be valued equally – regardless of race, gender, background, ability or neurodiverse need?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meena Wood is a former principal and HMI, and author of *Secondary Curriculum Transformed – Enabling All to Achieve* (Routledge, £24.99); she's also a contributor to the book *Beyond Belief – Why School Accountability is Broken and How to Fix It* (John Catt, £16)



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Maximise your capacity

If schools wish to expand their SEND support capacity, digital tools have to be part of the solution, says **Alessandro Capozzi**

The scale of the challenges facing children with SEND and their families in the UK has never been more stark. Schools and local authorities are working tirelessly, but the reality is that the system is overstretched. The number of young people with identified SEND continues to rise. Waiting times for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are growing, and teachers are under immense pressure to meet complex needs with limited resources.

For too many pupils, this means going without timely support at a critical stage in their education.

The recent Parliamentary inquiry into solving the SEND crisis presented a crucial opportunity for reflecting on these pressures and exploring practical ways forward. Throughout the evidence submitted from across the education sector, one consistent theme emerged – issues with resourcing and capacity.

At Academy21, we were pleased to contribute to this national conversation, drawing on our work with well over a thousand schools and local authorities each year.

Why online learning matters

Online learning isn't intended to replace in-school provision. Rather, it offers a way to extend specialist teaching, provide more timely interventions and support pupils whose needs can't always be met in mainstream classrooms.

Students who learn online can do so flexibly – from within school or at home, for example – and select those timings that best fit into



their wider provision. They can attend live, or watch lesson recordings on demand.

It's about providing flexibility, in partnership with schools for those children who need it – and thousands do.

1. Rapid access to specialist teachers

One of the most pressing challenges in SEND education is the shortage of specialist teachers. Online provision lets students access highly trained professionals, regardless of location. Whether a child lives in a remote area, or a region with limited in-school expertise, live online teaching ensures they'll benefit from quality instruction when they need it most. Their absence could be down to illness or trauma – whatever the cause, there will be a parity of education with their peers in the classroom.

2. Timely interventions

Delays in support can turn small challenges into long-term learning barriers. Digital provision enables schools to deliver interventions quickly, so that students can receive targeted support at the earliest possible stage. By addressing needs promptly, online teaching reduces the likelihood of issues escalating and helps pupils stay on track, academically and

socially. Indeed, online is perhaps uniquely placed to do this at scale – at Academy21 we know this, having taught many thousands of learners last year.

3. Flexibility for diverse needs

Mainstream classrooms can't always accommodate every child's individual requirements (be they due to medical conditions, emotional support needs or temporary absence). Online provision offers a flexible alternative that fits around pupils' circumstances, allowing them to continue learning without disruption, and reintegrate smoothly into school when ready.

4. Support for reintegration

For many pupils, online learning acts as an educational bridge. Students can remain engaged academically, while receiving additional support tailored to their needs that helps them transition back to mainstream settings more successfully. This approach ensures continuity in learning, preventing long gaps that could hinder development or confidence.

5. Cost-effective capacity building

Online provision maximises the impact of existing

resources. By supplementing in-school staff and freeing them to focus on pastoral care or in-class interventions, online learning helps schools manage rising demand without the delays and costs associated with recruiting new staff or building new facilities.

6. Regulatory assurance and scalable impact

Unlike ad-hoc solutions, accredited online provision operates within a clear regulatory framework that ensures safeguarding, quality assurance and scalability across regions. Schools and local authorities can deploy online teaching confidently, knowing it meets national standards while delivering immediate support to thousands of pupils.

A call to action

Policymakers, school leaders and local authorities must embrace the capacity that already exists. By integrating high-quality online learning into our national SEND strategy, we can protect children from being left behind and give teachers the support they need.

Technology isn't a silver bullet, but it is an enabler. Used wisely, it can ensure that no child with SEND is left without access to a great teacher. In a system under pressure, this is one bold step we can and must take now.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Make the connection

Joe Fautley highlights some of the common assumptions and misconceptions teachers can have when it comes to communicating with neurodivergent students

In this article, I'll be providing you with advice and tips on how to make your communication in the classroom more accessible and inclusive, so that you can engage effectively with children and young people who have SEND – including those who are autistic or neurodivergent.

I'll also give some specific guidance around autistic burnout, alongside reliable strategies for supporting and communicating with autistic and neurodivergent learners who might be experiencing burnout themselves.

The best ways of working

Accessible and inclusive communication is essential for ensuring that children and young people and others with SEND can fully participate in educational activities. The need to ensure that the voices of all children and young can be heard is a legal obligation for schools, and therefore a requirement that must be taken seriously.

Even putting that aside, however, extensive use of accessible and inclusive communication will help to

create a more generally positive and supportive environment, in which everyone will feel more comfortable with sharing their views. That said, inclusion tends to be an ongoing process. Children's communication needs can and do change over time, so it's important to be flexible and adapt accordingly.

Communication is, of course, a two-way process in which everyone involved has some responsibility for communicating with each

methods that are available. For children with SEND, these may include Makaton, British Sign Language, Talking Mats or Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), as well as other technological resources.

In practice, these communication methods may take more time to use than conventional speech, so remember to take that into account. Ensure that everyone feels able and confident in participating,

“Children’s communication needs can and do change over time, so it’s important to be flexible”

other as accessibly and inclusively – and therefore successfully – as they can. That's why it helps to be clear, early on, as to everyone's communication needs and preferences, which means holding open discussions about everyone's best ways of working.

Never make assumption about the ways in which people communicate, or the language they prefer to use, and be aware that everyone communicates differently. Some people might provide lots of information; others may give much less.

It's essential to have at least some awareness of the different communication

and that no one's excluded simply because they communicate in one or more different ways.

Jargon alarms

Never forget the importance of non-verbal communication, such as body language and facial expressions. For some young people, this may be their primary form of communication. Make sure that they're supported by someone in school who knows them well, but also be sure to enquire if the child or young person has a pupil passport or similar, to help explain their communication needs. Even articulate young people

can find it hard to describe exactly what their needs are, because of pressure to respond, confusion or embarrassment. If they seem especially hesitant or withdrawn, find other ways of explaining an issue, or giving them the opportunity to express their thoughts.

Naturally, you should think carefully about the language *you* use, and how appropriate it might (or might not) be for any given situation. A good general guide is to keep your use of language clear and simple, while avoiding jargon as much as possible. Any specialist terminology that's core to your subject curriculum, and thus unavoidable in lessons, should always be fully explained when students first encounter it.

Check everyone's understanding, and then reword, or use an alternative form of communication (one utilising visuals, for example) and/or sound,





where necessary. Consider keeping ‘jargon alarm’ bells or traffic light cards in the classroom, so that children and young people can use them to indicate when they don’t understand something.

Autistic burnout

Autistic burnout is a form of extreme, long-term exhaustion and overwhelm triggered over time, whereby the stress of coping with life’s demands exceeds the autistic person’s ability to cope. They may lose the ability to carry out everyday tasks, lose skills they usually have and experience multiple sensory difficulties.

Every day, we have to manage the sensory discomfort, overwhelm, social challenges, executive dysfunction, exhaustion from masking and social confusion that comes with being autistic. It’s no wonder we’re so often exhausted. Our energy is precious, and can be depleted fast. Recovering from autistic burnout requires rest, reduced demands and taking time out, so that we can prioritise self-care, set boundaries and seek adjustments.

It’s important to not only offer us support, but to also advocate for us. Having an awareness of the stigma and discrimination we face in

society is key to providing good support and managing burnout – so consider taking the following steps.

First, learn about autistic masking, and try to adapt your interactions so that the autistic person doesn’t have to suppress their autistic traits. It’s also helpful to make your classroom – and school – surroundings as autism-friendly as possible, thus ensuring that responsibility for this doesn’t fall solely on individuals with autism alone.

Focus on the autistic student’s strengths and qualities where they excel. Reassure them about how important these are, both to themselves and the lives of others around them. It’s also important to try and understand an autistic person’s triggers, to help them remove themselves from stressful situations. Finally, accept their experiences and validate their feelings and needs.

One way to get a better grasp of autistic-specific needs is to adjust to an autistic person’s preferred way of communication. This could involve respecting their communication preferences, be they verbal, written or visual, because it’s through creating a supportive environment that you can help autistic learners fully recognise their strengths.



The bucket analogy

To better understand autistic burnout, imagine an autistic child or young person holding a bucket that gets slowly filled up with various events, and social and sensory experiences throughout the day. Too many activities, too much change, too much sensory stimuli and too many demands will fill the bucket very quickly. When those demands and events exceed the capacity of the bucket, it will start to overflow – which is when meltdowns or shutdowns may happen.

These aren’t the child or young person’s fault; they’re caused by stimuli in the child’s surrounding environment, or interactions with people around them exceeding that child’s capacity, leaving their energy and overwhelm with nowhere else to go. As a result, supporting your autistic pupils by finding ways of keeping their levels below capacity and manageable is extremely important.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Fautley is an autistic and neurodivergent advocate, currently working full time at the National Children’s Bureau (ncb.org.uk), and has over 10 years of experience in SEND advocacy work, including co-delivering training across England and presenting at conferences.

You can hear more about Joe’s personal experiences and key advice for professionals in an episode of the SENDcast podcast, available via tinyurl.com/ts148-SC1

HOW TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC PUPILS IN THE CLASSROOM

- ▶ Maintain a flexible school environment
- ▶ Make the most of any sensory resources that autistic pupils may benefit from
- ▶ Greater differentiation within lessons may be needed to suit students’ needs in the moment
- ▶ Allow time for regulation and consider which spaces may be most suitable for this – some may need to run outside, others may prefer a quiet den or time in the library
- ▶ Autistic pupils who are feeling tired, anxious, depressed and in sensory overload may need extra support, such as visuals, within lessons
- ▶ Discuss with autistic pupils what may help them for particular lessons, for the rest of that day, that week or throughout the term – and note that what may work one day may not work the next
- ▶ Some pupils may find it difficult to request appropriate support if they struggle with alexithymia, and can’t identify how they or others are feeling
- ▶ Some pupils may also have difficulty interpreting their interoception (internal bodily) signals and require further support in this area
- ▶ If it can be accommodated, consider allocating more time to topics that engage these students’ personal interests

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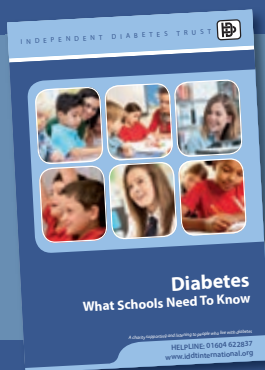


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For whom the bell tolls

If he had his way, **Gordon Cairns** would sound the death knell for those rude, school-wide blasts of disruptive noise that signal the end of one period and the start of the next...

Earlier this year, I was at a family gathering when the conviviality of the afternoon was suddenly shattered by a 3pm test of the government's emergency notification service blaring out from the numerous phones left in jackets and bags around the room.

As I searched for my own mobile to turn off the infernal racket, it struck me then just how bizarre it is that we teachers actually *choose* to expose ourselves to the same brutal noise multiple times over the course of a typical workday. Not to alert us to a terrorist attack or national disaster, mind you – just to let everyone know when it's time to transition from one place to another.

Unnecessary distress

The 'school bell' is a remnant from when timepieces

weren't readily available to the general population. Schools needed a method of mustering their students, similar to how churches still ring out to summon their parishioners.

But today, regularly interrupting the school day with a loud, toneless sound feels so *unnecessary* – as well as being unnecessarily distressing to those many neurodiverse students who are sensitive to noise. Young people already struggling to overcome many barriers to education don't need an extra sonic one.

I know of students who have to leave the classroom before the bell goes to find a quiet space. Others will put on ear defenders in anticipation of the end of the period. Many more suffer in silence, their focus lost as they anticipate the aural assault and think about how to deal with its aftermath.

A question of trust

For the school community as a whole, this all feels a bit reductionist. The school bell seems to suggest that we, much like Pavlov's salivating dogs, can be trained to perform desired reactions simply by hearing a loud sound, despite being surrounded by more than enough timekeeping technology to know exactly when our lesson is just about to finish.

Maybe the fear is that we can't be trusted to end our classes at the appropriate time without some kind of centralised notification system. Segmenting out the schoolday into time slots abbreviated by the bell was apparently once done to prepare students for factory life, yet they won't be encountering bells anywhere in their working future. Unless they become teachers, of course.

In fact, the *lack* of a school bell would do far more to prepare them for today's working environment, where the amount of time given to an activity isn't generally broken down into alarm-delineated chunks.

Classroom flexibility

The dead hand of tradition aside, there seem to be few good reasons for keeping the bell around. Changing the system would simply involve us educationalists synchronising our classroom clocks (or watches, phones, tablets or PCs) so that we know when our students should be dismissed. After all, it's not as if they currently arrive *en masse* at the start of the next class just as the bell rings.

There would be tangible benefits to teaching and learning too, in that the lack of a centralised alarm would give teachers more flexibility in the classroom. Currently, if I want my students to finish reading the chapter of a book before the period ends, I keep one eye on the book and the other on the clock as the minute hand creeps ever closer to the ringing bell.

I know the class will have lost their focus when they hear the sound, as they think about their transition to the next class. But if the teacher is given control over 'when the bell rings', the work can be satisfactorily concluded with only a minute or so of overrun, if that.

Sadly, today's electronic buzzers are nothing like the '*Laugh of a bell swung by a running child*', as recalled by Carol Ann Duffy in her classroom memories. If and when silent bells are eventually introduced, the ideal scenario would be for students and teachers alike to develop a 'sixth sense' that something is coming to a close, without needing a bell to remind them – akin to waking up naturally before that other unavoidably ubiquitous modern noise, the morning alarm clock...



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



A world of DIFFERENCE

Steve Brace charts the evolution of geography teaching over the past several decades, and considers what those changes might tell us about the subject's future...

As Ofsted rolls out its new inspection framework, it seems like a timely moment for geography teachers to reflect on the changes that have taken place within geography teaching over recent decades.

A new report by the Geographical Association, 'Standards in Schools Geography 1991-2023' (see tinyurl.com/ts148-G1), analyses this in depth, drawing on lessons from successive Ofsted inspection reports about the positive progress and ongoing challenges within the subject.

Written by Dr John Hopkin, with contributions from Dr Paula Owen, the report spans the National Curriculum's introduction in 1991, through to Ofsted's latest geography inspection report in 2023, and asks a key question – *'Have standards in geography changed, and if so, how?'*

In this way, the report presents a valuable subject benchmark against which geography teachers can reflect on past changes, assess their current practice and plan for the future.

1990 to the early 2010s

As geography teachers, we can identify two main periods of change. The first – from 1990 up until the early 2010s – could be broadly described as encompassing some good practice, but also ongoing weakness at KS3.

There were some initial difficulties with the

introduction of a complex geography National Curriculum. This first version had five attainment targets and programmes of study that spanned some 20 pages of requirements. Inspections at the time did find examples of good practice in secondary geography, but the same period also saw achievement at KS3 geography being consistently weaker than at KS4, with pupils' overall achievement in geography being lower than that in most other subjects.

“Despite being a statutory requirement, some schools didn't undertake any KS3 fieldwork at all”

Those lower KS3 standards were often linked to the merger of geography with other subjects. The integrated KS3 humanities courses that emerged from this process reduced time for geography, were characterised by weaker planning and, as the report points out, *“Tended to focus on teaching generic learning skills, rather than knowledge and understanding ... specific to geography.”*

Another factor linked to lower pupil attainment was the ongoing use of teachers who didn't possess a geography specialism – an unfortunate practice that continues to this day.

Latter 2010s to the early 2020s

Looking back, this could be seen as a period of

continually improving standards, particularly at KS3 (albeit from what was often a weak starting position). See, for example, a 2015 Ofsted survey report titled 'Key Stage 3: the Wasted Years?', which found that standards in as many as a third of KS3 geography lessons simply weren't good enough (see tinyurl.com/ts148-G3).

In recent years there's been more positive progress. Ofsted's 2023 geography subject report (see tinyurl.com/ts148-G5) identified

improving standards, especially at KS3, and noted that the KS3 geography curriculum was sometimes even more ambitious than the KS4 curriculum.

This turnaround in standards across the secondary phase has been linked to the good work of subject leaders and teachers in their KS3 planning, as well as the way in which new GCSE specifications became the de facto KS4 curriculum.

The period from 2010 onwards also saw significant increases in the number of pupils studying GCSE geography. In 2025 there was a record 303,000 GCSE geography candidates, compared to 180,000 in 2010, amounting to a rise in the proportion of pupils taking GCSE geography from 26% to 43%.

Overall achievement at GCSE has also improved, up from 58% of pupils achieving a then Grade C or better in 2000, to 66% achieving a Grade 4 or higher in 2025. That said, until 2016, GCSE results in geography were broadly in line with those across all other subjects; since then, geography's results have weakened, coinciding with two major changes. One was the introduction of new specifications that were designed to be more challenging. The other was a broadening of the ability range of pupils studying geography at GCSE, including greater uptake by pupils with lower prior attainment.

Persistent weaknesses

Alongside the positive changes, however, some weaknesses have persisted – one being the study of place. This is central to the discipline, yet it remains a big challenge for geography teachers. Inspection reports

have regularly commented on how some pupils are given insufficient opportunities to study places in depth, with a tendency to focus more on bite-sized vignettes.

This risks producing a fragmented and partial awareness of places that might see China studied only through the frame of its one-child policy, India in the context of its informal housing; or Brazil through the prism of it being home to large tracts of rainforest. The result can be to reduce complex places to a single process or issue, leading to students developing simplistic or stereotypical misconceptions.

Another ongoing issue relates to fieldwork. This too is a fundamental component of geography education, and has, at times, been recognised by some schools as one of the subject's strengths. The

COVID-19 lockdowns may well have dramatically restricted opportunities for conducting fieldwork, but a downward trend could already be seen well before COVID of diminishing opportunities in schools to engage with fieldwork. By 2023, fieldwork was reported to be weak in almost *all* schools. Despite being a statutory requirement, there were even some schools that didn't undertake any KS3 fieldwork at all.

The final area of concern relates to geographical skills, with inspections noting inconsistent and undemanding teaching of geographical skills and limited planning for their development. One area that was specifically highlighted was schools' use (or rather non-use) of Geographical Information Systems (GIS). In 2007, GIS was introduced as a requirement at KS3, and in subsequent GCSE and A Level specifications. However, in part due to gaps in teachers' knowledge, by 2023 GIS still didn't feature on most geography curriculums.

Taken together, the 'Standards in Schools Geography 1991-2023' report can help to inform subject leaders and geography teachers' practice, and provides some useful lessons around how standards in school geography have been relevant at different times to the subject community and more broadly.

Geography teachers should take pride in the notable advances we've witnessed, and in the positive improvements their subject has achieved over the past several decades. However, the report also highlights where further attention is needed, so that higher standards in KS3/4 geography can be more firmly established across all schools in future.

WHERE ARE THE SUBJECT SPECIALISTS?

Ofsted reports have frequently identified a recurring issue of how educational standards and quality are, to some considerable degree, dependent on teachers' geographical expertise.

Where standards in the quality of teachers' geographical knowledge and pedagogy are weaker – either through limited opportunities for CPD, and/or the use of non-subject specialist teachers to teach the subject – there tends to be a link with lower standards.

The challenge of recruiting enough subject specialist geography teachers continues, especially since 2010, given the growth in size of the GCSE geography cohort. In 2023, Ofsted observed that, "In most secondary schools, at least some lessons are taught by non-specialists."

The Geographical Association has recently launched a Subject Knowledge Scholar Programme, specifically designed support non-subject specialist geography teachers, further details of which can be found via tinyurl.com/ts148-G6



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Brace is chief executive of the Geographical Association; for more information, visit geography.org.uk

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Reading between the lines

Given today's febrile news landscape, schools can't afford to not put media and information literacy on the curriculum, says **Nicky Cox**...

When I co-founded the UK's first newspaper

written exclusively for children – nearly 20 years ago now – I did so with a very clear mission in mind. Quite simply, I've always maintained that the world will only improve if the next generation is better informed than the last.

Today's young people have vastly more access to information than their parents and grandparents at the same age; but how much of it can they trust?

Within just a couple of decades, the nature of news and how we discover it has changed beyond recognition. Once, families might have sat down together to watch the 6 O'clock News, or spread the Sunday papers out over the kitchen table to catch up on the week's big stories.

Now, children as young as five are regularly exposed to content that claims to be delivering information about current affairs via mobile phones and social media. (According to Ofcom, 37% of parents to 3- to 5-year-olds say their child uses social media apps or sites). Yes, they may stumble across reliable journalism – but they're much more likely to encounter opinion dressed up as fact, or disinformation spread either deliberately or through ignorance. Some of which will be deliberately designed to provoke clicks, fear and even hatred.

In this environment, media and information literacy (MIL) can't be seen as just a 'nice to have'. It's an essential, and schools have a vital role to play in its delivery.

Skills to thrive

Of course, I can already hear



the furious mutterings from brilliant and overstretched teachers: *'Really? Yet another 'vital set of skills' to be crowbarred into an already packed curriculum? When? And how?'*

But the truth is, every subject, lesson and interaction in schools is influenced by the information environment children grow up in. Pupils can't truly thrive, academically or personally, if they don't have the skills to separate fact from fiction, or are too anxious or cynical to engage with the world around them.

MIL doesn't just protect young people from the darker corners of the internet (important though that is) – it gives them the tools they'll need to engage with all aspects of today's curriculum and fully participate in society.

No time to lose

A young person able to analyse a news story, identify bias and form their own evidence-based view can contribute meaningfully to class discussions and later, democratic life. Because let's not forget, they'll soon be invited to cast their vote for the first time once they've turned 16.

"Many people, including

me, are hopeful that MIL will find a more prominent home in the school curriculum as a result of the current curriculum review."

So says Fran Yeoman, head of journalism at Liverpool John Moores University, and a trustee of the Media and Information Literacy Alliance (MILA). *"However, we should not adopt a 'wait and see' approach when it comes to ensuring that our children have the key skills they need to thrive in this complex information environment."*

At First News, we couldn't agree more. We feel a deep responsibility to be part of the solution, which is why we've partnered with MILA to produce a clear and practical framework for the teaching of MIL in secondary schools.

Drawing on MILA's pioneering work in this space and the Bournemouth University theory of change for media literacy, the framework is free to download and can be used by educators to plan MIL lessons with genuine impact, and track the progress of pupils in a meaningful way.

An education essential

However, we know that real change doesn't just emerge from the work of a single

Five quick checks for secondary students when analysing news:

- 1 Source** – who published this? Is it a recognised outlet or individual, or posted anonymously?
- 2 Evidence** – what proof is given? Are there any quotes? Any cited data? Or just opinions?
- 3 Bias** – whose perspective is being shown? Is there another side we're not hearing?
- 4 Emotion** – does the piece use language or images designed to provoke, rather than inform me?
- 5 Verification** – can I find the same story with the same facts somewhere else that I trust?

organisation or media outlet. As Fran Yeoman observes, *"Whether mandated by the curriculum or not, children need MIL education that is broad, critical and creative."*

This requires schools, policymakers and wider society to recognise that media and information literacy is as fundamental to a great education as reading and writing. Because without it, the next generation won't just be less informed than the last; they could grow up indifferent as to whether what they're being told is true at all.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicky Cox MBE is editor-in-chief and co-founder of First News, the UK's original news provider for children.

The First News MIL secondary framework can be downloaded from first.news/secondary-framework



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~ Nicky Ashby-Guest, Lead Practitioner, Outreach, Training & Development, The Gallery Trust

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Niall O'Connor, Deputy Head, Academic, Barnard Castle School

Will the real VLE PLEASE STAND UP?

It's taken too long for the initial promise of VLEs to be fully realised, says **Aaron Swan** – but they're now the best solution we have for cultivating the kind learning we want to see

There have been few occasions when the ball was dropped quite so hard as it was by Microsoft in 2020. It's a well-known story, but I still find shocking that it happened at all.

It's 2020, just before the COVID pandemic ushers in the era of 'hybrid' work. Right at the point when video conferencing becomes a mandatory part of daily existence. It's at this moment that Microsoft's then largest acquisition – at \$8.5 billion! – hits paydirt.

We were all told to stay home. We all logged on, but it wasn't Microsoft's Skype teleconferencing platform we all turned to. It was Zoom.

Portals and departments

Rewind to 2007. I've just completed my postgrad and my first school placement is at a £27m new build with a suite of 'virtual' laptops at the back of every classroom, plus a full suite of 'physical' desktops in every corridor. It's a sight to behold, and at the time, seems deeply impressive to me, with my 'pre-digital' upbringing. It felt like the future.

But even more notable than the obvious expenditure on computing was the school's new online learning space – its Virtual Learning Environment.

The school's website included a student portal. The portal held departments. The departments held year groups. The year groups held modules, and the modules *should* have held comprehensive learning

material for students to access. The future wasn't actually to be found with those computers at all. It lay in the independence made possible by the potential of that online space.

The intended outcomes of the earliest VLEs ultimately proved to be quite prescient. Students were given the opportunity, through their school's VLE, to become independent workers motivated by the drivers of autonomy, mastery and purpose. They provided the infrastructure needed for a

properly. The typical VLE page often resembled a child's holiday montage of images cut and pasted into a visual catastrophe. Use of clipart as a design crutch was commonplace.

Dropping the ball

Of course, we know what actually happened in 2020. VLEs were not up to scratch and departments went into overdrive to produce units of work that could be followed from home. Folders of PowerPoint presentations were moved from teacher

The process of building a VLE is no longer anything like the barrier it once was. Web design tools and online services, such as Microsoft's Sharepoint, feature incredibly user-friendly 'drag and drop' interfaces, and ready access to countless high quality images, design suggestions, automated assessments and quizzing apps, activities scheduling, and even the ability to track and log user engagement – all of which can be hugely empowering for teachers.

From 'prescriptive' to 'facilitative'

At this precise moment in time, VLEs have fewer barriers to entry than ever before, while promising the greatest reward. I find it hard to conceive of any school department existing without at least one member IT-fluent enough to build one. But then, do they really want one?

The transition from classroom-based learning to today's 'blended learning' environments partly requires an ideological adjustment – from a prescriptive view that *teachers alone are holders of knowledge which they impart to students in a controlled manner*, to a more facilitative view of education. Facilitated teaching permits autonomy through open access resourcing. Under a facilitative model, 'practitioners' reduce barriers to learning while increasing access to knowledge as much as possible. They *facilitate* the learning experience by

"As Zoom is to Skype, so social media is to VLEs"

flipped learning environment, in which students would undertake learning that we teachers facilitated through the provision of accessible material, and where they could come to us with questions.

VLEs served as platforms through which no student would be left behind, since all the required teaching and learning materials would be freely available, at any time. If those VLEs had continued to see maintained investment and development by departments over the next 13 years, schools would have been in the perfect position to provide their learners with robust redundancy.

The problem, however, was that the VLEs of 2007 were interfaces still very much in their infancy, which required significant staff upskilling and near-coding levels of computing knowledge to use

servers to student servers. Some of us teachers went to great lengths to pre-record learning material that our students could access in their own time.

A government press release dating from February 2021 stated that '£400 million' had been invested in helping over a million laptops and tablets be delivered to disadvantaged students. By 2022, that investment spend had reached £520 million.

Just like Skype, the VLE long predated the opportunity it was designed for. The intention of the VLE was validated by COVID in the same way that COVID validated the intention of video conferencing. And yet, after a decade of potential development, the true potential of VLEs still wasn't fully realised, with the technology itself still far from ready. The ball had been dropped.

setting the material and helping students to access it. And being facilitators, they're less concerned with delivering the material themselves.

As Zoom is to Skype, so social media is to VLEs. With schools continuing to show reluctance in moving from a prescriptive teacher-learner definition of education to a facilitative view, learners are opting to look for that facilitated, autonomous experience themselves – thus bringing students into the orbit of competitive, profit-orientated third party providers.

Many students now regularly turn not to resources provided by their teachers, but to resources propagated by YouTubers and TikTokkers. Social media ultimately facilitates student learning much more efficiently than schools do – though that efficiency shouldn't be confused with *efficacy*. It still remains to be seen whether education delivered through social media is qualitatively 'better' than the education delivered through school.

The cost of schooling

Note, however, that these shifts aren't just occurring in students' homes. Schools themselves are increasingly turning to online education providers that have built online learning structures, delivering on the original promises of the first VLEs all those years ago.

Third party providers use a wide range of automation methods to track progress and provide dynamic content that can be completed at home or in the classroom, meaning that no child needs to be left behind. They offer significant opportunities for

struggling departments.

And yet, that leaves us with an interesting question to consider – to whom should the education of our children be given? Students turning to online influencers and high profile channels are of a generation raised to value capital and tolerate advertising. Schools are passing on their budgets into the hands of third party education providers in ways that involve sums to the tune of tens of thousands of pounds per year, per school.

Taken together, there does seem to be a significant flow of capital away from educational institutions and into the hands of private companies – a hint of the privatisation of education taking place inside our state-owned infrastructure and also via social media.

At what point does the cost of schooling represent a middle-man expense, between private companies

and learners? And if these third parties can ultimately deliver successful forms of education, then at what point do we allow education to be facilitated by them alone, in response to the prompts of learners at home? Why not cut out the middle man of the school entirely?

Operation without oversight

Actually, we mustn't ever allow this. As a teacher who has spent years analysing the impact of such programmes, I'm rarely convinced they fully meet those promotional promises that first encourage our initial buy-in. They operate without oversight from an external body, such as Ofsted, and their success rate is entirely self-reported.

That said, I don't doubt that there have been some successes in this space, and I still support a small-scale uptake of

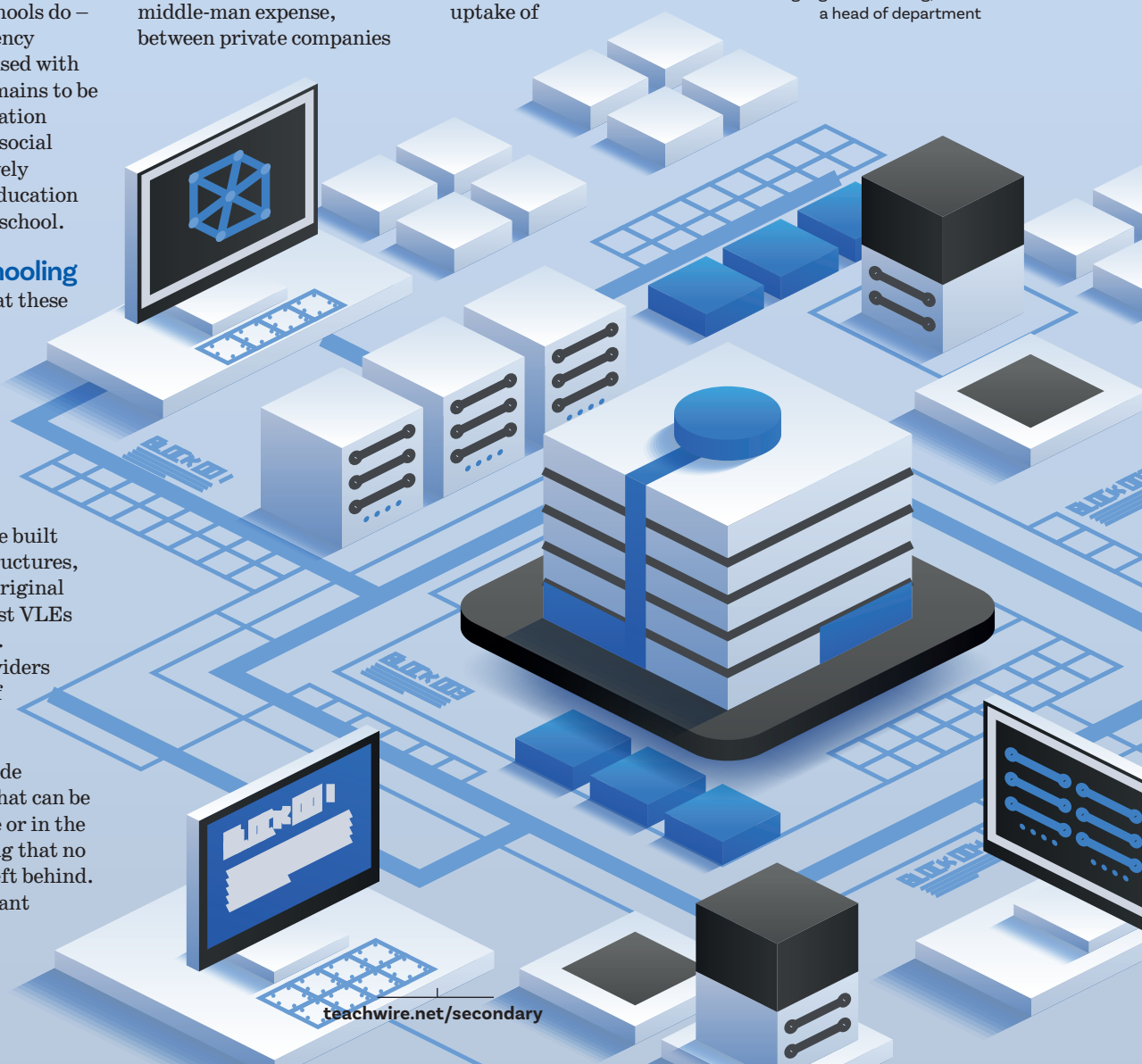
external providers to support teaching and learning. As we enter a new academic year with headlines regarding attendance, costs to parents and bad behaviour, perhaps we should be reinvigorating school VLEs again as a potential solution to our multiple barriers to learning.

After all, countless office workers have benefited from blended work. So why have we not yet demanded that schools use the tools they already have to provide their students with robust blended learning? Maybe, if we're to protect the future of schooling, we must.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



Get good at GETTING BETTER

Mark Enser and **Zoe Enser** share their advice on how to develop CPD that will actually improve your colleagues' teaching, rather than simply be a burden...

Professional development is one of the most powerful levers we have for improving the quality of teaching, and with it, outcomes for pupils.

And yet, many teachers will tell you that CPD sessions often feel like a distraction – generic, one-off events that do little to change what happens in classrooms. If we want CPD to *truly* enhance teaching, we should ditch the scattergun approaches in favour of a coherent professional learning curriculum.

Why CPD disappoints

This is one of the themes we explore in our book, *How Do They Do It?*, which documents our visits to schools across the country that consistently deliver excellent outcomes. Again and again, we saw that for these schools, CPD wasn't an afterthought, but a carefully sequenced, long-term project aligned with the schools' vision for teaching.

There are three common pitfalls that practitioners can fall into when devising CPD for teachers:

1. The one-off event – Too many schools treat CPD as an INSET day bolted on to the school calendar. A charismatic speaker might inspire staff for an afternoon, but without sufficient follow-up and planned practice, there will be few changes as a result.

2. The quick fix – Leaders under pressure can sometimes latch onto the

latest trendy initiative and enthusiastically roll it out for all staff, without considering the school's context. This can quickly overwhelm teachers and generate cynicism.

3. The bolt-on – Professional development is often disconnected from matters of curriculum design, assessment and other school priorities. If CPD starts to feel like 'something else to do', rather than a route to doing the core job better, it risks being ignored.

In our research, those schools that avoided these traps had one thing in common – they all treated their CPD activities as deliberately as the curriculum they designed for their pupils.

CPD as a curriculum

Just as we wouldn't hand pupils a random set of worksheets and call that a curriculum, we can't expect

A school's CPD curriculum should also be **sustained**. Development happens over months and years, not hours. Retrieval, revisiting and deliberate practice are just as important for teachers as they are for pupils.

Finally, a good CPD curriculum has to be **responsive**. There will need to be a clear spine of core knowledge and skills at its foundation, but good CPD can also adapt to emerging needs, such as curriculum changes, safeguarding priorities or feedback from exams.

As we discuss in *How Do They Do It?*, we saw leaders who mapped out their professional learning in the same way that they mapped out their pupil curriculum. Their teacher colleagues knew not just *what* they were learning this term, but also *how* it connected to the school's long-term goals.

are four CPD principles that we consider to be worth foregrounding:

1. Focus on the core business of teaching

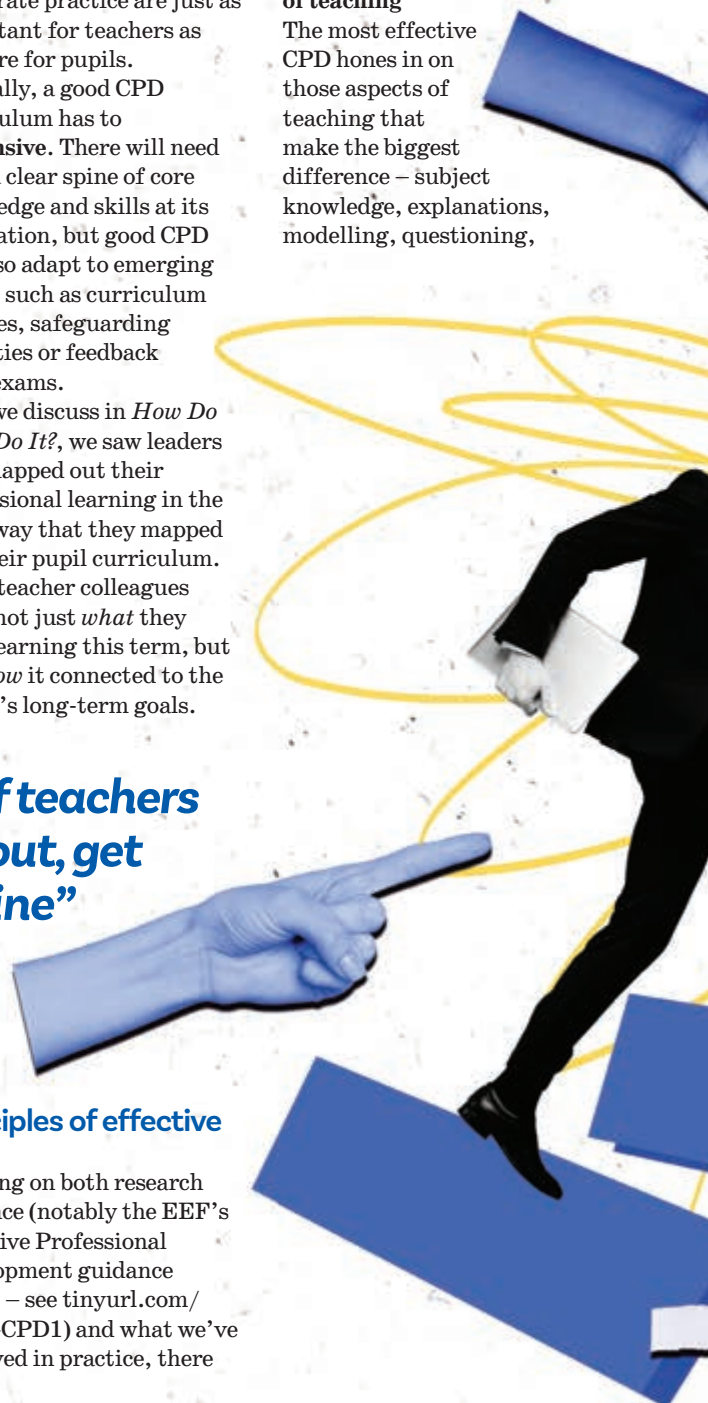
The most effective CPD hones in on those aspects of teaching that make the biggest difference – subject knowledge, explanations, modelling, questioning,

“CPD only works if teachers can try things out, get feedback and refine”

piecemeal training to effectively build teacher expertise. The best schools build a CPD curriculum that is, firstly, **sequenced**. Teachers will be introduced to ideas in a logical order, building on what they already know. This mirrors David Ausubel's insight that the most important factor in learning is what the learner already knows. The same applies to adults.

Principles of effective CPD

Drawing on both research evidence (notably the EEF's Effective Professional Development guidance report – see tinyurl.com/ts148-CPD1) and what we've observed in practice, there



assessment and feedback. Wellbeing initiatives and policy briefings have their place, but staff are most motivated when CPD directly helps them improve what they do in the classroom.

2. Make it subject-specific

Generic strategies often collapse amid the complexity of the classroom. A strategy that works in maths may be useless in PE. The best schools invest in subject-specific CPD, led by subject experts, so that teachers can see how well-crafted

principles can be applied to their own curriculum.

3. Balance theory with practice

There can be a danger of CPD being either too abstract (*'Here's some cognitive science – now off you go!'*) or too practical (*'Use this resource tomorrow'*). Real impact comes when schools ground practice in evidence while giving teachers time to rehearse and adapt strategies in their own context.

4. Create time for deliberate practice

CPD only works if teachers can try things out, get feedback and refine. Some schools we visited built these processes into their timetables via lesson study cycles, coaching conversations or video reflection. Others simply ensured that any new approaches were introduced slowly, with space to embed before moving on.

Leadership matters

In *How Do They Do It?*, we found that leadership is the decisive factor in whether CPD makes a difference. Leaders who got it right habitually did three things. First, they emphasised **clarity** by setting out a clear vision for teaching and making sure that every CPD activity aligned with it.

Second, they were **consistent**. By sticking with a few key priorities and seeing them through, they were able to avoid initiative fatigue. Finally, they demonstrated **trust** by treating staff as professionals and giving them agency to adapt ideas and share expertise, while also holding them accountable for implementation.

Workload and wellbeing issues are often less about the number of hours worked, and more about whether staff see their work as meaningful. CPD that feels coherent and purposeful will be energising, rather than just draining.

A culture of growth

Ultimately, CPD isn't about events or programmes, but about *culture*. In the best schools we visited, professional learning was part of the daily rhythm. Teachers would drop into each other's lessons. Subject teams debated the curriculum. Leaders would regularly model being open to feedback.

FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

If you're reviewing your school's CPD offer, here are some questions that might guide the process:

- ▶ What is the 'golden thread' running through your CPD this year?
- ▶ How does it build on what staff already know and do?
- ▶ How will you know if it is having an impact in classrooms?
- ▶ Where have you built in time for practice, feedback and refinement?
- ▶ How do you ensure CPD strengthens subject knowledge as well as pedagogy?

These are deceptively simple questions, but schools that return to them regularly will be those where CPD translates into better teaching.

In these schools, CPD wasn't something done to teachers; it was something they lived.

And that's the real lesson here. If we want CPD that improves teaching, we need to see it not as a box to tick, but as a curriculum in its own right – one that's sequenced, sustained and deeply connected to the craft of the classroom.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mark and Zoe Enser were both teachers and school leaders, ex-HMIs in Ofsted's Curriculum Unit and now co-authors of *How Do They Do It? – Learning Lessons from Amazing Teachers, Leaders and Schools* (Crown House, £16.99)

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[MATHS PROBLEM]

LINEAR SEQUENCES

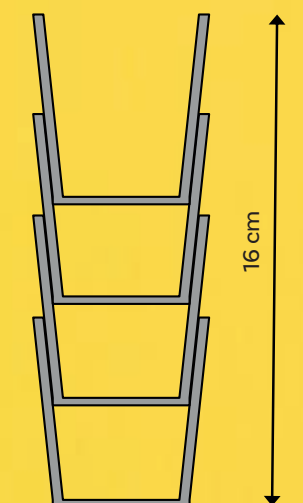
Finding a formula for a linear sequence is often challenging, says **Colin Foster**

In this lesson, students have to find a formula for a sequence based on a physical scenario.

THE DIFFICULTY

Look at this stack of 4 cups. (If possible, have some real plastic cups in the classroom.) It's 16 cm high.

How high would a stack of 8 cups be? Why?

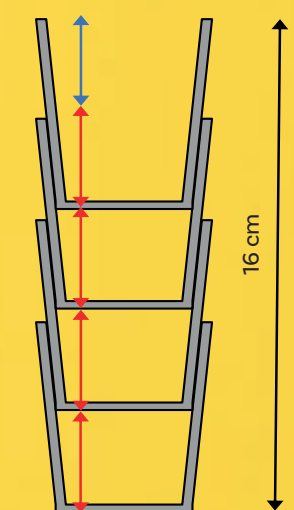


This is a bit of a trick question. Students are likely to double the 16 cm and say 32 cm, but that isn't right. See if students can see why 32 cm is wrong, and whether the correct answer should be more or less than that.

THE SOLUTION

In fact there isn't enough information in this problem to work out exactly how high 8 cups would be. However, we can say that 32 cm must be too large. If we took two stacks of 4 cups and placed them one after the other, that would make 32 cm. But if we slip the second set of 4 **inside** the first set, then that will save some space, so the correct answer must be **less than** 32 cm.

The key thing to notice is that the 16 cm is made up of *two different lengths*, shown in different colours above. Because of the stacking, there are 4 bottoms (red) and 1 top (blue). (Or you could say 3 bottoms and 1 whole cup. There are many other ways.) What's important is that there aren't 4 equal 'anythings' in the 16 cm – so it therefore makes no sense to just double the height for 8 cups.



How many red and blue lengths would there be for 8 cups?

Following the pattern, there would be 8 reds and 1 blue. When we doubled the 16 cm to get 32 cm, that would be equivalent to 4 reds and 1 blue, **twice**. In other words, 32 cm would be 8 reds and **2** blues. But actually, for 8 cups, we want 8 reds and **just 1** blue. So 32 cm is too long, and the correct answer must be less than this.

To work out the actual answer, we need more information.

Suppose we know that the total height of 10 stacked cups is 34 cm. That's now enough information – see if you can do it!

10 cups will be 10 reds and 1 blue, which is exactly 6 reds more than 4 cups. Since $34 - 16 = 18$, those 6 reds must correspond to 18 cm, meaning that 1 red must be 3 cm. It follows that a blue must be 4 cm.

Now that we know how much a red and a blue are each worth, we can find the correct answer for 8 cups: 8 reds and 1 blue make a total length of $8 \times 3 + 1 \times 4 = 28$ cm. This is shorter than 32 cm, as we deduced.

Checking for understanding

Can you invent a similar problem to this one, that has a nice neat answer, like this one did?

Students will need to think of a related scenario. One possibility could involve shopping trolleys being pushed together into a long line at the supermarket.



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

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LEARNING LAB

IN THIS ISSUE

- + Why maths teachers need to mind their language
- + What makes the '100% rule' key to achieving brilliant behavior
- + DfE announces post-16 pathways shake-up
- + If you think cybersecurity is solely the preserve of your IT team, think again...
- + Y8s to sit statutory tests of their reading skills
- + Unpacking the new 'belonging' criterion of Ofsted's inspection framework
- + The creative industries' case for a new 'digital creativity' GCSE
- + How to ensnare students' attention from the get-go

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Thinking about ...

THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

When I first shared my family's story in *The Boy With Two Hearts*, I never

imagined how far it would travel.

What began as a way to honour my older brother Hussein and process our journey as a refugee family has since become a book, a stage play and now a resource available to every school in the UK through the National Theatre Collection. To see our story reach classrooms up and down the country feels both surreal and deeply meaningful.

Over the years I've spoken at hundreds of schools about the story and its themes. Every visit reminds me that young people are far more empathetic and emotionally aware than they're often given credit for.

When I stand in front of a hall of students and share what it was like to flee Afghanistan to save my brother's life, you can feel the silence. They're not just listening to a refugee story; they're connecting to a human story about love, fear and hope.

Since the play joined the National Theatre Collection, that connection has now deepened. Teachers have told me how their pupils watch the production and then want to talk about belonging, courage, and mental health.

They ask questions that cut right to the heart of things: "*How did your parents stay strong?*" "*Did you ever stop being afraid?*" "*What happened to Hussein?*" Those conversations open doors that normal classroom discussions sometimes can't.

One of the most powerful

moments for me came after a performance in Wales, when a student came up to tell me that the story made them realise how much they'd taken their own family for granted. "*I went home and told my mum I love her for the first time in years,*" they said. That's the kind of impact that makes every part of this journey worthwhile.

I think *The Boy With Two Hearts* resonates so strongly with young people because it mirrors the questions they're already asking about the world. They're growing up at a time of uncertainty, amid constant news of conflict and division – and yet they have a deep instinct for kindness.

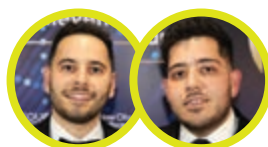
They want to understand what's happening beyond their own lives. When they see people their age facing fear or loss, they don't turn away. They lean in.

That gives me real hope. Every school visit, every classroom discussion reminds me that the next generation is not only compassionate but *brave* enough to confront difficult truths. They want to be part of the change.

Hussein's story started with one family searching for safety, but through the power of storytelling it has become something much bigger – a reminder of what connects us all.

Seeing that story now being used as a tool for learning, empathy and reflection across the country feels like the legacy my brother would have wanted.

For more information about the National Theatre Collection, visit tinyurl.com/ts148-LL1



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hamed Amiri (left, pictured with younger brother Hessam) grew up under Taliban rule before escaping at the age of 10. He is a playwright, motivational speaker and influencer in the education sector; for more details, visit hamedamiri.co.uk

FOCUS ON... THE LANGUAGE OF MATHS

"Excuse me! Can we be a bit more mindful about the language we are using please?"

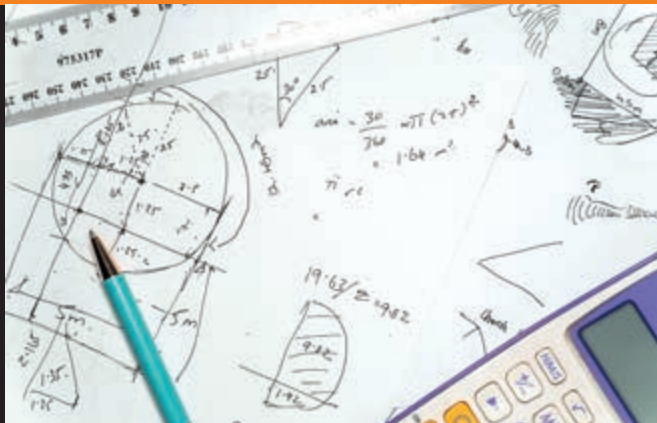
I'm not talking about the expletives you might hear being muttered by a Y10 student during a fraught Friday afternoon lesson. I mean the mathematical language teachers use every day to explain concepts and provide reasoning.

Precise vocabulary is something that can easily slip, but is essential for modelling what and how we want our students to learn. In fact, it was only when I started to write maths content for BBC Bitesize that I realised just how important it is.

There are great learning opportunities to be had when students use dodgy mathematical language. Discussing misconceptions can develop understanding, and students should always feel safe in offering their reasoning, even if it isn't polished. However, there are definitely some phrases that educators can work on getting right to ensure their students are building from firm foundations. Most maths teachers will know the problems with 'Add a zero to multiply by 10' and 'Two negatives make a positive' – but there are a few others we can fall foul of.

1. WHOLE NUMBER, NOT THE WHOLE PICTURE

Let's not be afraid to use the word 'integer' when whole numbers, by definition, are only positive. Integer is just a word like any other; if students can remember and



use the word 'stegosaurus', then they can handle the mathematical vocabulary required in assessments too.

2. CANCEL THE 'X'S AND MAKE THE MATHS CLEAR

Simplifying algebraic fractions is a tricky topic to get right. All maths teachers will have seen students cross off an 'x' on the numerator and an 'x' on the denominator inappropriately. Telling students to 'cancel the 'x's' contributes to this, as it doesn't explain the actual method that occurs. 'Divide the numerator and denominator by 'x' isn't as snappy, but it does explain the maths we need to do.

3. KNOW YOUR ANGLES

Geometrical reasoning is one area where GCSE mark schemes can be very specific. For communication marks, Edexcel mark schemes have the words 'angles' and 'line' underlined. An answer of 'A straight line is 180°' can't be awarded a mark, as it's important to state that the angles *sum to make 180°* – not the straight line.

4. CLEAR STEPS, NOT TRICKS

The phrase 'Move the 'x' to the other side' finally seems to be in decline. It's always suggested a kind of mechanical trick, when really, we want to present

solving equations as a set of procedural steps where each side of the equation stays balanced. It's on its way out, but still seems to be lingering on in certain resources and some classrooms.

5. TERMS CAN MISLEAD

If we follow an instruction to 'Get rid of the brackets', then expanding $2(x + 4)$ must give $2x + 4$. I've admittedly said this phrase many times, trying to convince myself that students 'know what we mean' – but it can also be heard by students who don't, and that can cause problems.

Students and teachers need to trust that the language in the resources they use is correct, but also fits exam specifications and mark schemes. BBC Bitesize's new GCSE maths content features exam-style questions and quizzes, and there's also a suite of videos that combine animation and narration for effective dual coding.

Most importantly, all content is written and reviewed by subject specialists to ensure consistent terminology and the kind of precise language that really matters. The words we choose and the resources we recommend shape how students learn and understand maths – so let's choose them wisely.

DO THIS

THE 100% RULE

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

Make the following your constant aspirational target – 100% of your students working 100% of the time with 100% engagement.

The closer you get to meeting the 100% Rule, the closer you'll get to achieving brilliant behaviour. Firstly, because it's simply not possible to work hard and misbehave at the same time. Brains just aren't capable of multitasking in that way.

Secondly, because the rule reduces the appeal of misbehaviour. If a student wants to misbehave, but everyone else is working, they'll be less likely to bother. And even if they do bother, their peers will be less inclined to join in.

And thirdly, because the 100% Rule helps to prompt compliance through social proof. They see their peers working hard, and so feel compelled to follow suit.

There's a bonus element too. When you add in good teaching and challenging work, your students will (almost certainly) make excellent progress – and when they do that, they'll buy into you more as their teacher. They'll know that the success they've had is down to you.

Most importantly of all, the 100% Rule will eventually become a social norm. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen over time – and often more quickly than you might think.

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



EMMA STUBBS IS A WRITER AND CONSULTANT FOR BBC BITESIZE GCSE MATHS; FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT [TINYURL.COM/TS148-LL2](https://tinyurl.com/TS148-LL2)

48%

of pupils want support from their teachers in helping to identify trustworthy AI content

Source: Opinion survey of 2,000 students aged 13 to 18 commissioned by Oxford University Press

A Levels and T Levels will soon be joined by an entirely new post-16 qualification – V-Levels.

According to the DfE, the introduction of V Levels is intended to replace some 900 existing vocational qualifications, simplify the post-16 educational landscape and see to it that students can access clearly designated pathways suited to their needs and talents, be they academic, technical or vocational.

V Levels have been conceived as a new Level 3 qualification that will provide vocational learning for those students keen to explore different sectors prior to choosing where they wish to specialise. The more technically-oriented T Levels will continue to include an industry placement.

The unveiling of V Levels forms part of a broader set of changes to post-16 education, including two new Level 2 pathways for 16- to 18-year-olds – a 2-year, employment-focused ‘Occupational Pathway’ aimed at getting students work-ready, and a ‘Further Study’ pathway pitched as a transitional option for those students wanting to pursue Level 3 studies but needing more time to prepare.

The DfE is also set to unveil new English and maths qualifications for 16- to 19-year-olds designed to, as the DfE puts it, “*Act as a positive step towards achieving a GCSE grade 4 or above.*” To further support those users struggling to secure said grades, centres will receive funding to deliver at least a hundred hours of dedicated, in-person teaching per subject each academic year.

Further details of the reforms can be found in the government’s recently published ‘Post-16 Education and Skills’ White Paper, available via tinyurl.com/ts148-LL6

THE REASONS WHY...

CYBERSECURITY IS EVERYONE’S JOB

When you’ve worked in school technology for as long as I have, you start to see patterns. Every few years there’s a new wave of tools promising to ‘transform teaching and learning’ – and every few years, a fresh set of risks come along for the ride.

Reading this year’s ‘State of School Cybersecurity 2025’ report (see secureschools.com/tsosc25), what struck me most wasn’t the statistics themselves – sobering though some of those were – but how clearly they reflect what I see every day across the schools in our trust.

Only half of the schools surveyed stated that they have a password policy. Fewer than one in five have someone formally responsible for cybersecurity. Less than 40% have an incident response plan in place. On the face of it, those numbers are worrying, but dig a little deeper and you find that the real story is one about capacity, confidence and culture.

RECOGNISABLE PROGRESS

In schools, ‘IT’ is timetables, attendance, safeguarding, payroll. When that stops, the learning stops.

I’ve seen what happens when a simple mistake is made – an unexpected attachment opened here, a link clicked in haste there. It can result in teachers and pupils being locked out of the systems they rely on. Lessons grind to a halt, staff scramble to find paper registers and the day becomes focused on survival, rather than learning.

There are some positive trends too, however. In our trust, we’ve seen teachers become more open to conversations around multi-factor authentication and phishing simulations. They understand that making small security improvements can really matter.



JAMES GARNETT IS IT DIRECTOR AT ASTREA ACADEMY TRUST; FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT ASTREAACADEMYTRUST.ORG



The cultural shift that’s seen cybersecurity increasingly become an everyday part of school life is the biggest improvement I’ve seen in the last five years – but cultural changes alone aren’t enough.

FALLING SHORT

Too often, responsibility for cybersecurity lands on one or two overstretched IT staff. The report found that just 14% of schools have a named individual accountable for their cyber strategy. Compare that with finance, and the gap becomes impossible to ignore.

Cybersecurity has to be included in curriculum planning and wellbeing. That means seeing backups not as optional extras, but a safety net that will keep children learning when things go seriously wrong.

At Astrea, we’ve learned to focus on small, repeatable habits. We test backups every term, review staff account access every half term and audit admin accounts monthly. These aren’t glamorous tasks, but together, they form the layers of defence that make us resilient.

The State of School Cybersecurity report highlights five priorities that align with what’s worked for us: keep systems patched; enable MFA everywhere; test incident plans regularly; assess third-party suppliers carefully; and assign senior-level accountability.

If every school did just those five things consistently, we’d cut our collective risk dramatically.

13%

The average salary increase teachers would need before considering applying for a teaching job in a disadvantaged area

Source: Education Endowment Foundation

Need to know

Bridget Phillipson, the Secretary of State for Education, last month used a speech at the Confederation of School Trusts conference to announce plans by the DfE to introduce statutory reading tests for all Y8s.

In a written statement issued the following day, Phillipson described how “Between the crucial staging posts at the end of Y6 and Y11, there is a gap where too many children slip further behind. Some pupils may struggle to catch up, while others who just reached the expected standard then plateau.”

The stated purpose of the new assessment will be to ensure that all children ‘Are on the right track’. Further details regarding the specific arrangements and format of the new assessment will be announced in due course.

For now, Phillipson has been keen to stress that, “This assessment is not about putting you, our incredible teachers and school leaders, under the microscope... it’s about giving you the tools and data you need to identify where children need additional help.”



CLOSE-UP ON... THE BELONGING GAP

When Ofsted’s 2025 Inspection Framework was launched in September of this year, it was made clear that ‘Inclusion’ is now a standalone inspection criterion, and that ‘Belonging’ is a brand new addition.

Achievement and safeguarding have long been familiar parts of inspection. ‘Belonging’, however, is a new focus that exposes some urgent gaps in our schools. The Global Equality Collective’s upcoming 26,000 Voices report (see tinyurl.com/ts148-LL3), drawing on the voices of students and staff in schools using the GEC Platform, highlights the scale of the challenge. Across hundreds of schools, half of students told us that they don’t feel as if they belong.

Closing that gap is now central to being inspection-ready. The Education Select Committee’s recent report on inclusion and equity echoes this (see tinyurl.com/ts148-LL4), pointing to gaps in SEND provision, inconsistent policy and an urgent need to strengthen pupil voice.

WHY BELONGING MATTERS

‘Belonging’ is the lived experience of being seen, valued and respected each day. International research, including my own work across 30 countries, has demonstrated that when students feel they belong, they engage more fully, achieve better and are less likely to be absent. When they don’t, we see disengagement, disconnection and even exclusion.

For SEND learners, the belonging gap is often wider. Too many report feeling unheard, invisible in the curriculum or unsupported in class. If adjustments are merely ‘bolted on’, rather than ‘baked in’, true belonging will remain out of reach.

THE INTERSECTIONAL DATA GAP

The problem is that most school data doesn’t currently capture belonging. MIS dashboards tend to mostly show attendance, attainment and exclusions – all useful, but limited in that they miss what I call the ‘intersectional data gap’ – the

overlapping realities of gender, race, class, SEND and more. The Equality Act (2010) requires schools to consider these as protected characteristics, yet many still lack the evidence to see where gaps are opening.

That’s why we developed the ‘Inclusion Index’. Based on Kaleidoscopic Data from our GEC platform, it blends quantitative trends with qualitative voice to show how staff and students *actually* feel about inclusion and fairness.

WHAT OFSTED WANTS TO SEE

Inspectors will expect schools to evidence how they embed pupil voice in decision-making; reflect diversity in the curriculum; create safe spaces for dialogue around discrimination and wellbeing; and apply policies fairly and consistently.

From our work with Inclusion Champions across the country, there are three distinct actions that can help bring this about.

1. **Listen differently** – Move beyond outcomes to capture lived experiences and act visibly on what you hear.
2. **Review representation** – Audit your curriculum and environments. Who is missing? Who is stereotyped?
3. **Lead effectively** – Whether in the context of SEND support, behaviour expectations or flexible working, fairness depends on policies being applied transparently.

A PIVOTAL MOMENT

For leaders, this applies extra pressure – because belonging must now be evidenced – but also opens up new possibilities. Closing the belonging gap with data for inclusion (intersectional and qualitative insights beyond the realm of MIS and AI dashboards) will help schools not just prepare for inspection, but also build cultures in which all students and staff can achieve, belong and thrive. Belonging isn’t optional any more. It’s now set to become the new measure of excellence.

DR NICOLE PONSFORD IS THE FOUNDER OF THE GLOBAL EQUALITY COLLECTIVE, AN EDTECH INNOVATOR, INCLUSION EXPERT AND DOCTORAL RESEARCHER, HAVING PREVIOUSLY WORKED ACROSS THE EDUCATION SECTOR AS A TEACHER, LEADER, TRAINER AND ADVISER. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT [THEGEC.EDUCATION](https://thegec.education)



On the radar

Time for a new GCSE?

A coalition of more than 60 education experts and organisations from across the UK's creative and digital industries is calling for the introduction of a new GCSE in 'digital creativity'.

As detailed in an open letter to Education Minister Bridget Phillipson and Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy (see tinyurl.com/ts148-LL5), the group envisage the new GCSE as being *"Designed to provide young people with the skills they need to pursue a career in the creative and digital industries."*

In practice, the mooted qualification would be offered alongside a 'reformed' computer science GCSE, and look to give students a choice between a more technically-

oriented computing route, and one more focused on learning how to use digital technology for creative work. As such, there would be an emphasis on applied skills in relation to visual design, audio production, the prototyping of games and apps, creative problem solving, digital storytelling and user interface design.

The letter goes on to note that the UK's creative industries currently contribute approximately £126 billion to the national economy and employ around 2.4 million people, while at the same time, school-based digital education has remained inconsistent, with many students finishing KS4 having not acquired the technological, creative, and problem-solving skills

employers in those industries are looking for.

The proponents of the new qualification have also suggested it may help to overcome the long-running gender disparity in GCSE entries for computer science, where girls currently account for just 20% of candidates.

According to Sir Ian Livingstone CBE, co-founder of the tabletop games producer and retailer Games Workshop, and one of the signatories to the letter, *"If the UK is to stay at the forefront of the global digital economy, we must equip and empower the next generation with the skills needed to navigate and innovate in a world being transformed by AI and robotics."*

TRENDING

Our pick of the recent resources and launches teachers might find useful...

BRUSHES AT THE READY...

Registrations are now open for the annual competition organised by the Art Bytes inclusive national art programme for Y5-Y9. Open to all schools in the country, the contest will see regional and national winners chosen by a judging panel of educators and professional artists, with winners getting the chance to see their work exhibited in London's Saatchi Gallery, The Henry Moore Institute in Leeds and elsewhere. The closing date for submissions will be February 2026. artbytes.co.uk

TALKING IT THROUGH

Crown House Publishing, the independent book publisher known for its education titles, has launched EduTalk – a new podcast aimed at supporting teachers' practice and professional development. The first episode features academic and government education advisor, Andy Hargreaves. tinyurl.com/ts148-LL8

1 MINUTE STUDENT CPD

5 WAYS TO HOOK STUDENTS' ATTENTION

ZEPH BENNETT OFFERS SOME PRACTICAL POINTERS FOR ADDING CLARITY TO YOUR NEXT CLASSROOM PRESENTATION



1

BE PROVOCATIVE

Ignite curiosity by posing a thought-provoking question, or presenting a startling statistic or fact related to the topic



2

INCORPORATE MULTIMEDIA

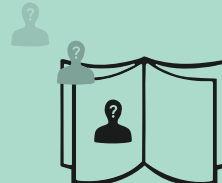
Utilise media that students are already familiar with and enjoy, such as short-form video, interactive simulations, educational apps or even relevant podcasts



3

CONNECT THE LEARNING TO STUDENTS' LIVES

Make the subject matter more relevant by linking it to students' personal experiences, hobbies or future aspirations



4

CREATE A SENSE OF MYSTERY

Humans are drawn to stories, so start the lesson by weaving a narrative, presenting a historical anecdote or setting up a problem that needs solving



5

TURN LEARNING INTO A GAME

Introduce an element of friendly competition or collaborative challenge to increase engagement – quizzes can be an effective way of doing this

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](https://twitter.com/teachsecondary)

What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

1

Improve your music practice

ABRSM's Teacher Hub is packed with courses, resources and events designed to inspire and support all kinds of teachers from the classroom to the music practice space.

Whether entering the profession or already teaching, the Teacher Hub is designed to help music teachers enhance their skills with CPD-accredited courses that support professional growth, high-quality resources to inspire creativity and enhance learning, and forums that encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Sign up now for free via tinyurl.com/ts148-WN1



4



Computer science for everyone

The Raspberry Pi Foundation is a global charity with a mission to enable young people to realise their potential through the power of computing and digital technologies. We engage millions of young people worldwide in learning computing and digital making skills through a thriving network of clubs and events.

This includes running Code Club – a network of free computing clubs for young people. We enable any school to offer students the opportunity to study computer science. We do this by providing the best possible curriculum, free resources and training for teachers. Learn more at

raspberrypi.org/teach

2

How autism-friendly is your school environment?

The BeyondAutism Outreach team empowers schools and staff to create the best environment for every learner. By providing specialist support, we help schools and settings build inclusive and confident teams. Our services include online and in-person training, consultancy and the BeyondAutism Fast Responder programme, in order to deliver rapid, hands-on support when it's needed most.

Alongside our paid services, we can also offer a wide range of free resources, from webinars to practical toolkits. Whatever challenges you're facing, our team can work with you to find clear and sustainable solutions. Book a free consultation today to discover how we can support your setting by visiting bit.ly/Outreach-and-Training-Print



3

Identify additional needs early

Every classroom has students who need extra support – but what about those learners whose challenges aren't obvious? Whether it's a mild support need or a specific form of SEND, Cambridge Insight can help you identify it early as part of a diagnostic assessment.

Its adaptive baseline assessments give you a rounded picture of each student's strengths and gaps, helping you spot patterns that might indicate a speech, language and communication need, dyslexia or other specific learning difficulty. With Cambridge Insight, you don't just get data – you get clarity, confidence and actionable strategies to improve outcomes for every student. Find out more at cambridge.org/insight.



MyThriveScan

5

A clearer view of wellbeing

Thrive has introduced My Thrive Scan™ – a new way for school leaders to understand and evidence pupil wellbeing across the whole school. Using two simple scans, the School Wellbeing Snapshot shows pupils' social and emotional development, alongside details of how well the school's provision supports them. Leaders can celebrate what's working, spot where more help is needed and show the difference their work is making under the new Ofsted framework. Built for busy schools, it's quick to use, affordable (£30 + VAT per month) and grounded in Thrive's evidence-based approach to wellbeing. Learn more at

thriveapproach.com/my-thrive-scan

6 Transform your sports experience

Looking to enhance your sports facilities this year? Check out education canopy provider Fordingbridge's

growing range of all-weather solutions:

- Join the padel boom: Adding all-weather padel facilities to your site creates a coveted new facility for students, as well as an exciting new revenue-driving opportunity.
- Make existing facilities all-weather: Installing a canopy over existing courts is an investment that reaps instant rewards, enabling your school to hold and host year-round sports lessons, clubs and events.
- Encourage fitness: Add covered gym facilities to your playground to encourage students to develop a daily fitness habit.

Find out more about Fordingbridge's sector-leading sports solutions today at fordingbridge.co.uk/sectors/canopies-for-schools



7 Refresh your teaching

Upskill your team and overhaul your RE teaching with subject-specific, adviser-led INSET days, tailored one-to-one support and CPD from RE Today.

We understand the challenges involved in equipping staff with the skills and subject knowledge needed to navigate the complex topics of RE. RE Today is at the forefront of the subject, empowering schools and teachers with the latest forms of training, valuable consultancy and expertly designed classroom resources. Our National RE Advisers are fully equipped and ready to deliver bespoke support.

Whether you need team-wide training or tailored advice, we will help you tackle today's RE challenges with confidence.

Find out more via bit.ly/3K5Nv5J



8 Everything you need to teach media and information literacy

In a world where anyone can publish anything, young people are growing up in an environment where information is fast, fragmented and not always trustworthy. The First News MIL TeachKit makes teaching media and information literacy easy, with

clear, progressive frameworks, fully resourced schemes of work, dynamic teaching packs and plenty of teacher support.

Lessons are updated fortnightly using the latest news – even difficult events – to spark safe, meaningful discussion; visit firstnews.co.uk/mil to find out more about how to develop your students as capable and confident consumers, and creators of media and information who will be ready to question, challenge and positively shape the world around them.



9 Slumber support

Sleep Action (formerly Sleep Scotland) is the UK's oldest sleep charity. Sleep Action trains teachers to deliver sleep education as a key component of the health and wellbeing curriculum. Its Sound Sleep course provides educators with a comprehensive understanding of sleep, along with curriculum-aligned lesson plans and wellbeing resources to improve pupil focus, attendance and academic success, promoting a happier and healthier school experience.

Sleep Action's approach is based on the latest sleep science, supported by over 27 years of experience, making its guidance easy to understand and apply. Sleep education is vital – because there is no health and wellbeing without sleep.

Find out more at sleepaction.org or by following [@sleepactionorg](https://twitter.com/sleepactionorg)



10 Empower your EAL learners

FlashAcademy® helps EAL learners thrive, with engaging digital lessons, adaptive assessments and curriculum-aligned resources. The learning app includes support in 48 home languages, helping pupils build confidence and access the curriculum as they develop their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills.

Teachers get to save valuable time with AI-assisted marking that reduces workload by up to 150 hours annually, while data-rich dashboards provide clear evidence of progress and areas for targeted support.

Designed for both classroom use and independent study, FlashAcademy® makes EAL learning inclusive, engaging and effective. Our Grow CPD programme also equips staff to deliver impactful EAL support across the curriculum.

Elevate your EAL provision, empower your EAL learners and request a free trial by visiting flashacademy.com

MEDIA LITERACY



Media & Information Literacy TeachKit

A toolkit to instil essential life skills in your pupils

AT A GLANCE

- From a leading source of news and news-based learning for children
- Free frameworks created with the Media and Information Literacy Alliance (MILA)
- Schemes of work that slot easily into your timetable
- Teaching packs connected to real, up-to-date news stories
- Designed to help students become lifelong media interpreters

REVIEWED BY: JOHN DABELL



Teaching 'the news' is a minefield. Teachers need reliable, tried-and-trusted resources that safeguard against misinformation, while equipping students with the critical literacy skills to question, evaluate and navigate the media landscape with confidence.

That's why First News has created a new KS2/3 resource that's rooted in the Media and Information Literacy Alliance's five aspirations – to be informed, empowered, healthy, socially conscious and connected.

The end result, First News' Media & Information Literacy TeachKit, sets out the essential knowledge and foundational skills young people need to thrive in today's information society.

An impressive collection of related resources on topical news items is available for teachers to download, including lesson plans, teaching slides and parent guides, along with vocabulary and scenario cards, worksheets and templates. These resources combine to form a powerful package that can help students dig past the headlines to question sources, analyse meanings and sharpen their critical thinking.

Every lesson plan is thoughtfully put together, with clear learning objectives and helpful guidance on how teachers should look to navigate sensitive content. The lessons follow a balanced format that carefully blends starter activities, reading,

class discussion, creative production and reflection. Editable PowerPoint slides are also included, giving you the flexibility to adapt and tailor the content so that it's a better fit for your particular context and certain groups of learners.

A downloadable parent guide accompanies each lesson, featuring "Ask me what I learnt today" prompts to spark meaningful conversations at home.

The MIL TeachKit is intuitive and user-friendly, giving you instant access to your downloads, saved lessons and any resources you've created. You can personalise your dashboard so it's tailored to the yeargroups and subjects you teach, while also tracking your school's network activity. Quick links make it easy to jump straight to the resources you need, and you can seamlessly toggle between expert-written and community-crafted lessons and packs. One of its standout features is a built-in AI tool, which enables you to create high-quality lessons in just two minutes – a real game-changer for busy teachers.

Students need news they can trust. First News' MIL TeachKit can equip them with the essential skills they'll need to become confident, media- and information-savvy citizens, while providing teachers with impactful tools for getting students to question, analyse and reflect on all the media they encounter, use and create.

teach SECONDARY

VERDICT

- ✓ Helps students engage with media in healthy, critical and active ways
- ✓ Encourages students to interrogate sources of news and information
- ✓ Empowers young citizens to become more informed and active participants in society
- ✓ Develops students' critical thinking so that they can make more balanced, evidence-based judgements about the information they encounter
- ✓ The complete package for any media-savvy classroom

PICK UP IF...

You are looking for practical, ready-to-use tools that can bring media literacy to life, help students look past the headlines, explore issues in depth and develop the critical skills they need to question, analyse, and make sense of the world around them.

first.news/mil

teachwire.net/secondary

STATIONERY →

YPO Refillable Whiteboard Pens

Economical and environmentally responsible dry-wipe markers for busy classrooms



AT A GLANCE

- Dry-wipe felt tip pens for everyday whiteboard work
- Easily refillable using specially designed ink bottles
- Made from 90% recycled materials
- Robust and chunky enough to suit hands of all sizes
- Available in a range of colours and nib sizes

REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES



I'm old enough to remember what a boon it was for classroom practice when individual dry-wipe boards became available. They were a great way to immediately gauge understanding, without having to resort to targeting questions at the usual suspects, or recourse to the lottery of drawing names on lolly sticks at random out of a hat.

It might seem like a small thing to the uninitiated, but it was so useful to have the whole class simultaneously showing me their proposed answers to questions. Teachers being teachers, they could probably enthusiastically explain a hundred other ways in which they use them in their lessons.

The trouble was, those markers seemed to run out depressingly quickly. It took me back to the childhood disappointment of receiving a brand new pack of felt tips, only to find them drying to scratchy uselessness after what seemed like just a picture or two.

Similarly, as a teacher, I can remember that sinking feeling as my supply of replacement whiteboard pens steadily dwindled, adding to the world's pile of discarded plastic in the process. How soothed my conscience would have been if only we'd been using YPO's refillable whiteboard markers...

First things first, these dry-wipe markers perform as well as any others I've ever encountered. The ink flows smoothly, and whatever mark you've made wipes clear easily. What's different here, as the name suggests, is that their ink can be topped up as many as 35 times. When you think about how many classes they could be used in, that's a huge amount of waste avoided. And they're already made of 90% recycled materials to start with.

Refilling them is easy. Simply open the refill bottle, pop in the pen and leave for an hour or so. No mess, no fuss – job done. They come in four different colours – black, red, blue and green – with a variety of nib sizes and styles on offer, including 'chisel', 'broad', 'bullet' and 'fine'. Gauges are clearly marked on the outside of each marker, so you don't have to scrabble through boxes and remove lids to find the one you want. Personally, I really appreciate thoughtful little design considerations like this.

I suspect my internet price comparison skills aren't foolproof, but from what I can tell, it would appear that these YPO pens will represent remarkably good value even if you use them just once, let alone refilling 35 times.

To give you some idea of the potential savings, a pack of 50 black fine tip pens is

available from just £15.99 + VAT. With refill bottles which can be used up to 25 times, going for around £3 + VAT, it's not hard to see how they make good economic as well as environmental sense.

**teach
SECONDARY**

VERDICT

- ✓ Reliable and comfortable
- ✓ Perfect for classroom use
- ✓ Easy to refill
- ✓ Environmentally sound
- ✓ Great value

UPGRADE IF...

... you want to continue enjoying the benefits of whiteboard work in a way that's both environmentally responsible and economically beneficial.

Prices start at only £15.99 + VAT for a pack of 50; find out more at ypo.co.uk



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

"Hatred is a learned behaviour"



The scenes at recent anti-immigration protests are a sobering reminder of how important it is for students to distinguish between nationalism and patriotism, warns **John Lawson**...

Some readers might recall a viral video that did the rounds during 2024's 'Summer of Unrest'. It showed a primary schoolboy draped in an England flag at an anti-immigration rally, chanting obscenities against a deity revered by well over a million UK residents. His mother – who, from the footage, seemed unable to discern the difference between patriotism and nationalism – is shown as being proud of her 'feisty tyke' for speaking his mind.

His mind? Or hers? Why would this lad harbour such vitriolic anger against any particular deity or religion? He surely wouldn't have learnt such hatred in RE lessons. Hatred is a learned behaviour. Love, kindness and affinity are all far more natural – and more worthy of nurture.

Dignity versus skulduggery

I'm a proud Englishman, but that pride doesn't mean that I believe England does everything 'better' than other countries. Because we don't!

The late Norman Tebbit's 'Cricket test' once probed the loyalties of Asian and Caribbean 'Colonials'. While I've always rooted for England, I've never let national pride sully the joys of watching Lillee and Thomson terrorising English batters, or Viv Richards and Sachin Tendulkar destroying our bowlers. Sometimes, sport itself is the biggest winner.

I love watching the world's best in any sport. Being dignified in defeat, and learning from the experience, is an admirable trait that every child should be taught. We don't lose, we *learn*. Which is why it's shame, not pride, that I feel at the sight of lumpen hooligans chanting 'In-ge-land' while vandalising European city centres after a football match results in a loss for their team.

And besides, if England really is 'just for white English people', how do we explain British imperialism, or colonialism? Were those British invasions of distant foreign territories warmly embraced by their local populations? As Desmond Tutu once commented in jest, 'When white missionaries came to Africa, we had the land and they had the Bible. They asked us to close our eyes and pray. When we opened our eyes, they had the land and we had the Bible'.

History teachers shouldn't be required to airbrush the skulduggery of the past that helped to forge Great Britain, and their refusal to do so doesn't mean

that they hate England. Fantasy stories, myths and legends don't belong within a factual history curriculum. We owe it to our students to teach them truths about our collective past, while sensitively contextualising some British excesses.

Unconditional love and truth

Does it dilute anyone's pride to acknowledge that Russia played a huge part in the defeat of Nazism? It's been said of the 2016 EU referendum that we went to bed in Great Britain and woke up in 'anti-woke' little England. It remains debatable how true that is – but we should at least acknowledge that Brexit hasn't been painless.

So, what does nationalism provide that patriotism doesn't? The key difference is that authentic patriots love their country deeply, and are prepared to stand up against anything that poisons the virtues that their nation proudly proclaims. Patriots are often empiricists, utilising truth and facts to establish reality.

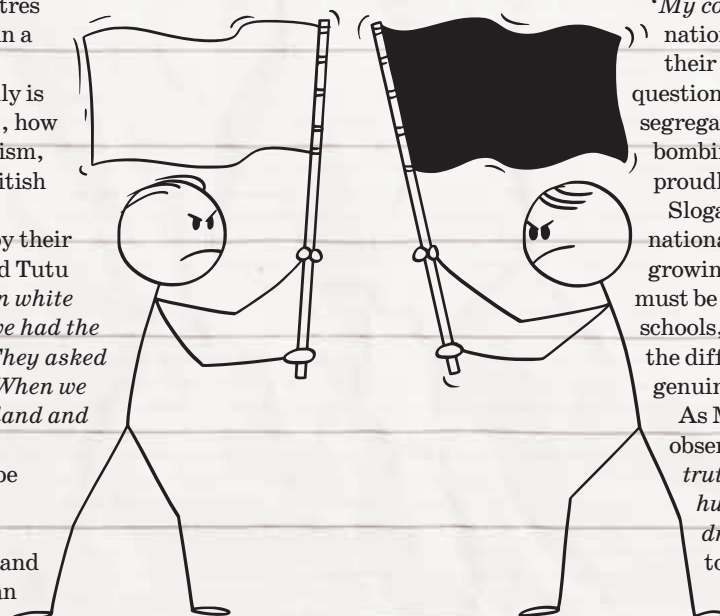
When Colin Kaepernick, an African-American NFL quarterback, first took a knee during the playing of the US national anthem ahead of a match, the then-presidential nominee Donald Trump demanded that the owners of his team, the San Francisco 49ers, fire him instantly. They couldn't, however, because Kaepernick wasn't – and indeed isn't – a traitor. He continues to insist that he's a patriotic American, having since regularly protested against the institutional racism of some police officers against African Americans. I, for one, have never doubted his patriotism.

Nationalists, on the other hand, readily adopt the motto,

'My country right or wrong'. A nationalist might concede that their country is involved in questionable actions – such as segregation, annexation or the bombing of other countries – yet proudly defend those actions.

Slogan-driven, jingoistic nationalism has since become a growing problem in England that must be addressed honestly in our schools, so that our children can tell the difference between that and genuine patriotism.

As Martin Luther King Jr. once observed, "Unconditional love and truth will have the final say in humanity's fate...only love drives out hate." It's time now to call out anyone calling upon our children to hate others.



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● A Hyve Event

ExCeL London
21 - 23 January 2026

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