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co

DR RAJ SINGH



*"My teacher came to
watch me in panto"*

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The perks teachers
REALLY want

PRIZE PROBLEMS

Do student reward
systems actually work?

INCLUSION BASES

What yours needs
and why it matters

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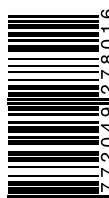
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9

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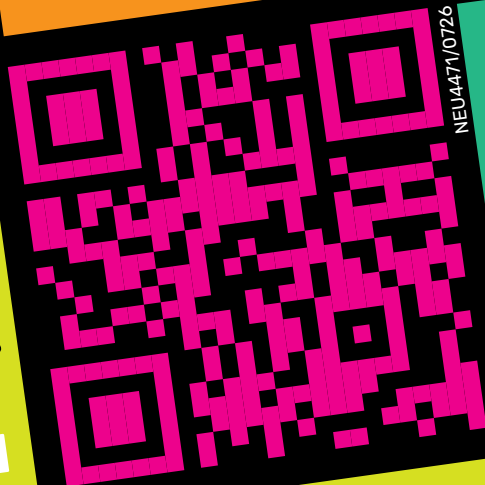
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In maintained schools, only the local government unions (GMB, Unison and Unite) are recognised to collectively bargain on behalf of support staff.

FROM THE EDITOR

“Welcome...”



*“I’ve got a delivery of a trite observation, here. Where do you want it?”
“Ah, splendid – just over there, thanks. Let’s see, is this thing working? Okay, here goes – ‘Let’s all give a warm welcome to Lucy Powell, recently appointed the eleventh Education Secretary we’ve had in the last ten years!’”*

Yes, we can all chuckle ruefully at how many people have held the top job at the DfE over the past decade, though that absurd turnover perhaps says rather more about the haplessness of several recent Prime Ministers than it does about our national priorities when it comes to shaping education policy.

Before being shuffled out of the role in the wake of Andy Burnham’s appointment as PM, Bridget Phillipson had set a few wheels in motion. Say what you will about the decisions and errors of Keir Starmer’s administration, the team at Sanctuary Buildings couldn’t be accused of coasting.

In short order, we saw the imposition of VAT on private school fees, some bold announcements regarding updated Ofsted inspections, a wide-ranging review of existing curriculum and assessment arrangements overseen by Professor Becky Francis of the Education Endowment Foundation, some slightly confused messaging over a perceived need for Y8 reading tests (see p83 for more on that) and a concerted effort at taking phones out of students’ hands during the school day.

The big question now, of course, is how much of that agenda will carry over into the Powell era. At this early stage, technical education is fast emerging as *the* key area of focus, primarily motivated by Burnham’s determination to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training, and a desire to rebalance the proportions of school leavers opting for university versus those taking up apprenticeships or other work-related training opportunities.

Writing in *The Telegraph* soon after her appointment (see tinyurl.com/ts156-C1), Powell stated that, *“Under this government, academic and technical options can and will be complements, not rivals”*. That seems like a different set of priorities compared to when Gavin Williamson was loudly championing T Levels around five years ago, and certainly a contrast with plans later mooted by Rishi Sunak to create an entirely new ‘Advanced British Standard’ post-16 qualification by smooshing T Levels and A Levels together.

In that same article, Powell went on to note that *“The next challenge is to ensure our system is for all, not just some. That means SEND reform, clearer application, technical education and more”*. That suggests that the SEND reforms and curriculum changes will still be going ahead, only now with an overarching ‘NEET-neutralising’ core mission to tie all the strands together. Will it work, or will we be here discussing another change in direction two years from now? Only time will tell...

Enjoy the issue,

Callum Fauser
callum.fauser@theteachco.com

On board this issue:



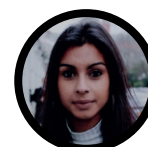
Ed Carlin is a deputy headteacher



Nikki Cunningham-Smith is a SENCo and behaviour consultant



Dr Özgür Bolat is an education researcher



Meera Chudasama is an English, media and film studies teacher



Liam Murphy is a class teacher and humanities curriculum lead



Sarah Kate Towlson is an assistant head of teaching and learning

KEEP IN TOUCH!

Sign up for the weekly TS newsletter at teachwire.net/newsletter

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teach SECONDARY

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thriveapproach.com/thrive-school-routes



The newsletter

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

The UNINFORMED teacher's guide to...

BIRDING

The mental landscape many of us navigate when we're online is far from ideal. We might just be looking at images or text on a screen, but too often, that content will be presented in forms that are shouty, brash, relentlessly attention-grabbing and crude.

Now, close your eyes and imagine the polar opposite. Quiet. Solitude. Peace. Nature. All of which you're likely to find while 'birding' – the more modern catch-all term for the pursuit traditionally referred to as birdwatching, which seems to be presently enjoying something of a renaissance among teens and twentysomethings.

As reported by *The Guardian*, *Digital Trends* and others, #birding and #birdtok hashtags are on the upswing, as are the follower counts of noted birdwatching TikTok content creators like Jack Baddams (@jabaddams, closing in fast on 298,000 followers at the time of writing). Aside from the inherently wholesome, wellbeing-boosting nature of the hobby, some have attributed this surge of interest to the release of Merlin Bird ID – a clever app that lets users identify birds anywhere in the world via photos and/or sound recordings captured on their phones.

Okay, so there is still an online element involved, but as buzzy, 'look at what I'm doing' hobbies go, you can surely do far worse than hanging out with your mates in the woods in the hopes of catching sight of a goldfinch...



DO SAY

"Rosy starling.
Unreal."



DON'T SAY

"YOU WON'T
BELIEVE WHAT THIS
CHAFFINCH
DID NEXT"

BEAT THE BUDGET



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Ready-to-deliver presentations, video content, scenarios and printable handouts intended for use as part of a staff INSET session, all created in accordance with the latest 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' and 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' guidance.

What are we talking about?

Safeguarding INSET day pack by High Speed Training

Where is it available?

tinyurl.com/ts156-NL1



WHAT THEY SAID...

"Government is making really difficult decisions, but in the long run, undermining the creativity in our country is foolish because we are really good at it."

Professor Evelyn Welch (vice-chancellor of Bristol University, chair of the Russell Group and mother of singer Florence Welch) speaking out against proposed cuts to university arts and humanities provision

Think of a number...

55%

of teachers prefer to receive SEND training in-school, delivered by an outside specialist; only 16% favour online short courses

Source: Teacher Tapp survey commissioned by Etio and The PTI

20%

of school leaders are satisfied with the government's education policy – up from 9% last year

Source: School Leaders Survey research carried out by Browne Jacobson

75%

of teachers agree that parents are treating students' lost property as 'disposable', preferring to replace items rather than retrieve them

Source: Survey of 500 teachers carried out by the company My Nametags

ONE FOR THE WALL

"Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave"

Henry Peter Brougham



Persistent problems

More children are being raised in poverty by families facing housing insecurity, with deleterious effects for their school attendance, wellbeing and general safety, while the systems ostensibly there to support them struggle to deal with growing backlogs of cases.

That's the picture presented by the Centre for Young Lives think tank's latest annual 'State of the Nation' report, which uses data gathered from a range of different sources to track trends in income, mental health, education, safeguarding, housing, SEND and youth justice. Among this year's headline findings are the 33% rise in children living in temporary accommodation since 2018, which hit a record high of 165,450 in 2024, and the 176,36 children identified as missing half of their schooling – a dramatic threefold increase since 2017/18.

On a more positive note, the number of children classed as being persistently absent – that is, missing 10% or more of their school days – was found to have fallen by nearly 10% over the past year, with permanent exclusions down by 9%. Other measures moving in the right direction included the number of first-time youth offenders (down 3.8% over the past year) and a 23% fall in food insecurity over the same period.

The report's recommendations include making the reduction of childhood vulnerability a 'national mission', and creating a cabinet-level 'Children and Families' unit charged with co-ordinating action across education, health, housing, justice, employment and local government.

The full report can be downloaded via tinyurl.com/ts156-NL3

SAVE THE DATE

SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

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



THE SPEECH:

Ofsted HMI delivers remarks to Festival of Education

WHO? Sir Martyn Oliver, His Majesty's Chief Inspector

WHERE? Festival of Education, Wellington College, Berkshire

WHEN? 2nd July 2026

"Since [November 2025], we've published almost 6,000 report cards. That is, of course, a small sample if you think about the number of schools and providers and settings all over the country. So while it is too soon to draw anything particularly conclusive, there are some positive trends starting to emerge that I'd like to tell you about.

Currently, 84% of schools and FE and skills providers are achieving 'expected standard' or above in 'leadership and governance'; 84% across both remits. That's hugely reassuring! It means there are leaders who are setting priorities and acting on them, instilling a culture of high expectations for all pupils and making sure staff have the training and knowledge they need to make that change happen.

We're also seeing very positive results for the 'inclusion' evaluation area. At the moment we see 85% of FE and skills grades and 89% of schools at, or above 'expected standard'. It means that, on inspection, we're seeing leaders who actively identify which pupils and learners need support and who do all they can to make sure they have it.

I am also pleased to report that 'attendance and behaviour' is graded at over 84% 'expected standard' and above. I hope this positive figure can start to alleviate the concerns that some have had about this evaluation area.

And as I have said before, we will always, always recognise where you are working against the odds in this area. We look at your context, we use it to understand the circumstances you are working in, but we never use it to pre-determine our grade.

THE RESPONSE:

NFER responds to national pupil projections

FROM? Michael Scott, senior economist at the National Foundation for Educational Research

REGARDING? The DfE's latest projection of the national pupil population

WHEN? 16th July 2026

"The new data confirms that secondary pupil numbers have peaked at 3.2 million and are forecast to fall by 8% by 2031 (to a little under three million). Schools in areas such as London are likely to be hit sooner. Secondary school leaders should be keeping a close eye on how numbers are changing in their local area and plan accordingly, if they are not doing so already."

NFER
National Foundation for
Educational Research

7 OCTOBER 2026 Alternative Provision Conference | 10 OCTOBER 2026 CASE Annual Conference | 20-22 JANUARY 2027 Bett UK 2027

7 OCTOBER 2026

Alternative Provision Conference
Online
tinyurl.com/ts156-NL2

School leaders seeking advice and guidance on the latest developments and policy changes pertaining to AP should make a note in their diaries of this Government Events-organised online conference. Those tuning in will get to hear expert insights on areas ranging from the government's impending SEND reforms and safeguarding for complex needs, to what makes for an effective accountability framework.

10 OCTOBER 2026

CASE Annual Conference
Hybrid online / 32 Woolwich Road, Greenwich
case.org

The Campaign for State Education has this year given its annual conference the title 'Why are so many children unhappy at school? And what we can do about it.' Those making their way to Greenwich and paying the £20 entry fee will get to explore the possible responses to that question in the presence of expert academics, experienced educators and a recent school student.

20-22 JANUARY 2027

Bett UK 2027
ExCeL London
uk.bettshow.com

As seasoned educators will know, Bett is where you go to see and get hands on with the very latest edtech innovations. From time-saving administrative tools to cutting-edge audiovisual solutions designed for the classroom, there's a plethora of discoveries waiting to be uncovered at the event's sprawling exhibition floor, plus all manner of inspiration to be had from the show's extensive programme of speakers and drop-in CPD sessions.

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Get Into Film



Each year, the UK-wide Into Film Festival welcomes an audience of half a million pupils and their educators to over 3,000 free screenings and film events.

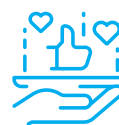
This year's festival will be supporting the National Year of Reading, in partnership with the National Literacy Trust, encouraging children and young people everywhere to Go All In on the films they love by reading into them, celebrating the important link between film and literacy. Whether it's getting lost in a modern re-telling of *Sense and Sensibility*, or immersing yourself in the world of Super Mario, there's a film and story out there for every pupil.

An exciting programme of new and classic films and events featuring literary adaptations will be announced on September 8th, when bookings will go live exclusively for educators.

Taking place from 6th to 27th November, the festival itself will bring the magic of cinema to students aged 5 to 19 at cinemas across the UK, with tickets available on a first come, first served basis. Those attending can look forward to free cinema screenings, free educational resources, filmmaking workshops, careers-focused events and Q&As with filmmakers.

Students are also encouraged to join the Into Film Festival Review Writing Competition, which will give them the chance to develop their critical thinking and writing skills while competing for prizes.

For more details and booking information, visit intofilm.org/festival.



Like and subscribe

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

Abeba Birhane @abeba.blacksky.app
imo, you have to choose between using genAI OR cultivating fundamental educational values. you simply can't have both

Urban Teacher @urban_teacher
In an attention economy, outrage does not have to persuade everyone to succeed, it simply has to keep enough people looking.

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

TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

'Testing, testing...'

Our headteacher was a commanding figure, and in an exceptionally bad mood one morning, as some students had behaved very badly in the local community the previous day. Presiding over that day's assembly in the school's main hall, in the midst of forcefully expressing his disapproval, you could have heard a pin drop. As he reached a crescendo, his voice rising, he said, "I've just got one last thing to say to you..."

...and at that exact moment, over the hall's speakers, came the words of someone who just happened to be testing the school's PA system - "I'm H.A.P.P.Y! I'm H.A.P.P.Y!" - spelling out the letters in a jaunty tone of voice. As the headteacher stormed out of the hall to locate the individual in question, the assembled staff and students did as much as they could to contain themselves...

Moving along nicely

We were playing a cricket match against a prestigious independent school. As the away side, we went to bat first and scored a creditable number of runs. When it was the home side's turn, they proceeded to notch up a series of runs in rapid succession.

The umpire was having a busy time of it, frequently signalling to the score box manned by a couple of the home school's non-playing students - but then suddenly noticed that the score box wasn't where it should be.

Unbeknownst to him (and us), several of our travelling spectators had, in fact, taken it upon themselves to lock the scorers inside the score box and 'transport' them a good 75 metres or so around the boundary. Needless to say, we never played that school again...

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

ENOUGH AS YOU ARE

#1 - SEPTEMBER, COMMENCING THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR

The graphic below comes from 'ENOUGH AS YOU ARE' - a deck of 52 affirmation cards intended for pre-teens and teenagers created by 12-year-old Marco Ruggieri.

Each card carries an original message - one for each week of the year - written in the style of a supportive peer to help navigate areas such as anxiety, exam stress, friendship challenges, body image concerns and peer pressure. The full deck can be ordered from enoughasyouare.co, priced at £14.99.

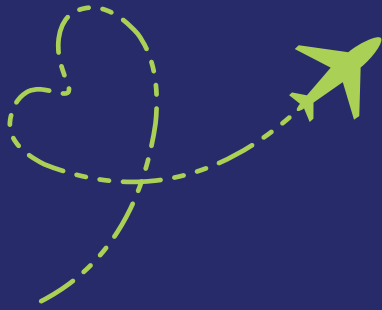
ENOUGH

You belong in the room.
Ask the question. Take up space.

@ENOUGHASYOURE



#enoughasyouare



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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

The culinary world is richly seasoned with French vocabulary, but the animal kingdom also bears a distinctly Gallic imprint. Words such as 'lion', 'leopard', 'panther', 'giraffe', and 'gazelle' all entered English directly from French.

More intriguing is how zoology and gastronomy can intersect.

Following the Norman Conquest, French became the language of the elite. Meat was largely the preserve of the elite too, which may explain why the English names for certain meats differ so markedly from the animals from whence they come. In French, these connections remain more transparent – beef from French *bœuf* (ox), pork from *porc* (pig), veal from *veau* (calf) and mutton from *mouton* (sheep).



LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

If much of language is non-verbal, then it follows that meaning can be conveyed outside the literal meanings of word. Consider the following exchange:

Woman: "I am leaving you."

Man: "Who is he?"



Taken in isolation, these statements don't seem directly related, yet most people will immediately grasp the implied meaning. In pragmatics, this is known as *implicature* – meaning inferred by the hearer that extends beyond an utterance's content.

Such meanings can sometimes stem from logical or contextual inference. If someone says, "Mike visits the gym five times a week," a listener may infer that Mike is physically fit, though this isn't explicitly stated. Others depend on social conventions. Replying, "I have a lot of work tomorrow," to an invitation may conventionally be understood as a polite refusal. They can also draw upon culturally shared assumptions or stereotypes. From my own experience, hearing that someone is French may lead listeners to infer particular personality traits, social attitudes or cultural characteristics, regardless of whether such assumptions are justified.

In a society where language is closely scrutinised and interpreted, some people will exploit pragmatics as a tool for reputational damage or bullying. Beneath the superficial patina of social decorum and sanitised language, individuals may still manage – with apparent impunity – to convey noxious meanings to, or about others.



TEACHING TIP: LOW-STAKES ASSESSMENTS

Low-stakes

assessments, such as short quizzes, are a valuable strategy for explicit vocabulary instruction – though the first question to ask is, 'What vocabulary should be targeted?' In literary texts, teachers may encounter more unfamiliar words than time permits them to teach, making it important to prioritise those words that most affect comprehension – especially when context provides insufficient semantic clues.

Quizzes are useful for early recognition, but shouldn't replace the generally deeper and more effective learning strategy of retrieval practice.

Multiple-choice questions may involve finding definitions, images, synonyms or gaps in a text, but pupils shouldn't be able to arrive at correct answers through a process of elimination because the distractors are so implausible. L

One approach I've experimented with involves including unfamiliar words containing morphological clues, such as affixes or roots previously taught explicitly, or encountered indirectly.

Finally, reviewing vocabulary assessments should always be viewed as an opportunity for feedback and further explanation.

SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS



His loud voice
echoed through
the empty hall



The headteacher's
speech **echoed** the ethos
and culture of her school



Bats use **echolocation** to
navigate in the darkest
environments

5 REASONS TO TRY... Smarter school purchasing

YPO on why schools should look closer at their basket



30 SECOND BRIEFING

Schools have more purchasing options than ever. Online marketplaces are convenient, but there are invisible risks under the surface. That's why public sector buying organisations (PSBOs) like YPO can highlight a better solution for schools.

1 EVERY DECISION COUNTS

Large online marketplaces often leave you spoilt for choice. Hundreds of products that look almost identical at varying prices. Navigating these platforms can be time consuming for schools, meaning purchases can be rushed. But as these platforms are driven by sales, rather than customer experience, any sale is fine. For PSBOs, it's all about making things easier for the customer. Doing the legwork to provide a streamlined selection of options that are fit for purpose, at a great price and all from trusted suppliers.

2 VALUE WITHOUT VOLATILITY

Everyone wants the best deal they can find, but not every deal is what it seems. Online retailers let prices freely fluctuate on changing demand and automated systems, enabling discounts that don't necessarily reflect the true value of an item. One month the price goes up, the next it's down with 25 per cent off. In contrast, PSBOs prioritise transparency and consistency. Committing to everyday low pricing enables schools to benefit from the best value possible, providing more certainty for budget planning. When discounts do appear, they're based on real savings to help every pound go further.

3 CHAMPIONING COMPLIANCE

On some popular marketplaces up to 97 per cent of products are sold



by third-party sellers, leaving platforms to manage compliance and safety on hundreds of millions of items. Despite the proactive processes in place, product recalls are a common occurrence. When one product is flagged, near-identical products could still be on sale, leaving marketplace purchasing open to unnecessary risk. PSBOs put compliance and safety first, products are placed under rigorous quality control procedures before being available to purchase. Meeting the required standards to help keep schools, teachers and pupils safe.



Contact:
ypo.co.uk

4 THE TRUE COST

Even with the processes these platforms have in place, there are instances where dangerous products slip through the cracks. In May 2026, the BBC reported that Temu was fined £173 million for selling illegal products, including baby toys with high chemical contents or clear choking hazards, all ready to be purchased by unsuspecting buyers. Consumer testing publication Which? estimated that around 8.8 million consumers have experienced harm from faulty or unsafe products purchased from online marketplaces. On the contrary, PSBOs carry out in-depth vetting on both suppliers and their products before anything is listed, so schools can rest assured these issues won't affect purchases or pupils.

5 BUY BETTER, DO BETTER

Every purchase your school makes contributes to something. For large online marketplaces, this is usually profit into someone's pocket – sometimes at the additional expense of sustainable production or workplace and staff safety. With these platforms, it's unknown how much profit actually goes back into supporting the frontline. PSBOs are almost exclusively driven by their purpose. They exist to support public services, creating jobs, and delivering value for communities, such as contributing to school initiatives or environmental causes. The key thing is that it's all transparent, so schools know their spend matters.

KEY POINTS

25 per cent of products flagged by the Office for Product Safety and Standards posed a risk to children

Which? estimated 8.8 million consumers experienced harm from faulty or unsafe products purchased from online marketplaces

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We can't carry on as we are where young people's experiences of social media are concerned – but is a sweeping ban of all users under the age of 16 really the answer?

Natasha Devon



Last month, the government announced a much-anticipated ban on under 16s using social media. It's presently due to come into force in Spring 2027, and follows in the wake of a national consultation that garnered some 116,000 responses indicating overwhelming public support for the ban.

Those welcoming the move will doubtless include the NEU. Its 'Big Tech's Little Victims' report (see bigtechlittlevictims.org) last year called for just such a ban, though the report's proposals did also include rolling out compulsory digital literacy sessions in all schools, clear labelling on AI-generated content and a levy on social media companies that would fund children's mental health services (all of which I wholeheartedly support).

I understand why many people feel that a ban is the only way to address the unaccountable tech giants' enormous (and still not yet fully understood) impacts on our young people's development, world-view and quality of life. Back in 2016, when children's use of social media was talked about, but less widely feared than it is now, I actually expressed support for a ban myself in a column I wrote for a national publication. I've since changed my mind.

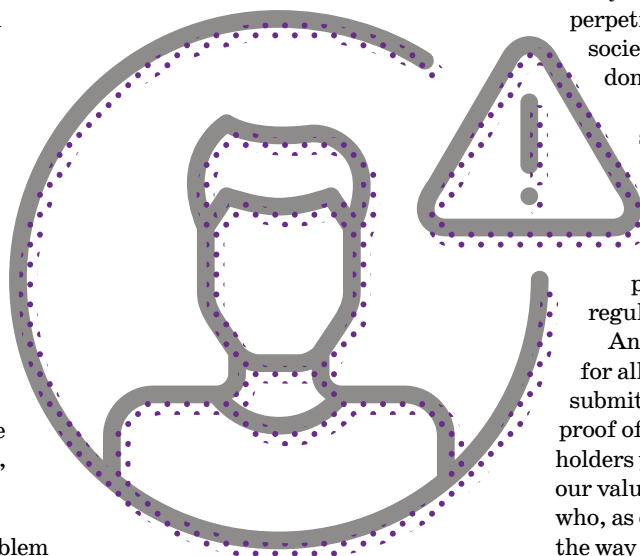
A blunt instrument

Please don't misunderstand me – I'm far from content with the status quo. Much more needs to be done to regulate social media platforms, curb their powerfully addictive algorithms and make them safer for everyone. However, I've yet to find a neutral, credible expert – whether their specialism be childhood trauma, neurodivergence, neuroscience, or technology – who *doesn't* see this ban as a blunt instrument that won't solve the problem

it's trying to address. And which might actually make the situation even worse...

Some recently published studies out of Australia – where under 16s have been banned from accessing social media since December 2025 – indicate that two thirds of 12- to 16-year-olds have continued to use social media regardless. This speaks to an uncomfortable truth; that young people are consistently smarter than us when it comes to using technology, and will inevitably find clever ways of circumventing any technical restrictions put in their way.

Some will argue that even if that's the case, a ban at least sets out society's stall on the issue, much like our prohibition of alcohol consumption for under 18s. Yet this stance fails to recognise two things – a) that there's already a ban of sorts in place for children, given that most social media platforms state in their user agreements that you must be 13 or older to register an account, and b) that by enshrining this into law for under 16s, the government has made the issue taboo.



In 2027, if a young person is being groomed or radicalised online, or being cyberbullied, they'll be less likely to tell an adult. That's because in addition to the challenges that already make such disclosures difficult, they'll be wary of getting in trouble for using social media in the first place.

Absolved of blame

Then there are the younger users who genuinely benefit from social media – such as young people who may be disabled, LGBTQ or marginalised in other ways who have found supportive online communities. Or abused children, who have previously used social media to obtain information and support.

As the neuroscientist Dr Dean Burnett has pointed out, if a person has gambled all of their money away in casinos, we wouldn't diagnose them with an addiction to buildings. All sorts of things can happen in buildings – some good, some bad – and the same applies to online spaces.

Which brings me to my central point. The government have framed this move as a way of 'standing up' to the Silicon Valley oligarchs responsible for perpetrating so many harms in our society, when in reality, they've done the opposite.

The platform owners know that statistically, most under 16s will manage to circumvent the ban. Meanwhile, they've been absolved of the costly, time-intensive work of

properly managing and regulating their content.

And then there's the necessity for all social media users to submit sensitive ID documents as proof of their age, thus giving platform holders yet more opportunities to mine our valuable data. Platform holders who, as ever, will be laughing all the way to the bank...



It's been a tough decade for English GCSE exam outcomes and A Level admissions, but could things be turning a corner...?

Melissa Benn

At the time of writing, the country seems set to have its first English graduate serve as Prime Minister – just as public discussion about the decline of English as a university subject grows increasingly anguished (see tinyurl.com/ts156-MB1).

Explanations for this decline have identified a range of factors – from the heavy push towards STEM subjects under Rishi Sunak's premiership, to the misplaced emphasis on the technical aspects of grammar in the primary SATs. Yet perhaps the biggest issue is how English continues to be taught and examined at secondary.

“Very wide disquiet”

Following the Coalition government's 2013/14 education reforms, take-up of English at A Level has steadily declined, dropping from 83,000 in 2013 to 54,000 in 2023 (see tinyurl.com/ts156-MB2), leading to a drop in university applications (see tinyurl.com/ts156-MB3).

Those curious about the deeper reasons behind these changes would do well to follow the work of The English Association, which has cited a “*Very wide disquiet right across the discipline of English at secondary, further and higher education level*”, and declared the current GCSEs to be “Not fit for purpose” (see tinyurl.com/ts156-MB4).

Dr Lorna Smith of the University of Bristol has studied the underlying philosophy of the 2013/14 reforms, and believes that many features of the current GCSEs “*Can be traced back to the absence of the term ‘creativity’ from any official document of that period*”.

Lack of respect

Many teachers have also criticised the removal of the ‘speaking and listening’ component from the older English GCSE, given how emphasising

oracy had previously been an effective way of engaging students who find writing more of a challenge. As Dr Smith observes, “*There is so much research that shows how crucial talk – and dialogue – is to learning, across all subjects.*”

The Curriculum and Assessment Review led by Professor Becky Francis has proposed some welcome tweaks to the English curriculum and qualifications, including the suggestion that schools place a greater emphasis on oracy more generally. Some of the proposals are yet to be finalised, however, while others won't come to pass for years yet.

Sadly, the story of the English language and English literature GCSEs speaks to much deeper – and deeply regrettable – trends in the politics and culture surrounding English education, including a notable lack of respect for on-the-ground experience and expertise.

Instead, we have education policy delivered from on high, prescribed by Ministers and Ministerial advisers with very fixed ideas of what ‘high standards’ should mean, based on their own schooling – often undertaken long ago, and frequently at elite institutions.

The forgotten third

For figures such as Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, whose legacies have dominated the education

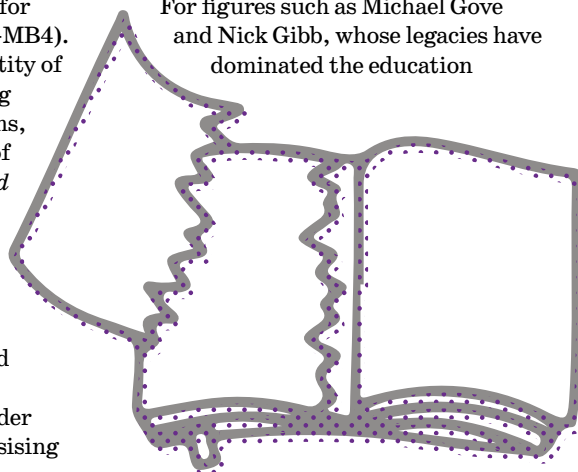
landscape for so long, notions of ‘creativity’, ‘diversity’ or indeed ‘enjoyment’ are just part and parcel of the ‘soft bigotry of low expectations’. Back in the 2010s, their thinking could be summed up as ‘*Pile up the content, and the exam pressures and standards will inexorably rise*’.

This, however, is to completely misunderstand the true purpose and potential of school for millions of children, particularly those often labelled ‘the forgotten third’. For them, school could be an ideal opportunity to begin understanding what really absorbs and interests them. In reality, secondary education has become a source of boredom, stress and unhappiness.

Predictably, much of our media (whose leading members often don't understand state education) have been excitedly drawn in by this sterile ‘standards’ narrative. Our broadsheets and broadcasters have consistently stated that English secondary education improved a great deal over the past 14 years. It's a narrative that the current Labour government seems unable or unwilling to challenge, instead promising just a rather empty-sounding ‘*Evolution, not revolution*’ – but we require neither of those.

What we need instead is a profound rethinking of what's being taught and how, alongside changes in who we consult about the curriculum and assessment. Where the English GCSEs are concerned, the government should listen to those who know what's actually happening in the classroom, and who have put forward a series of realistic proposals for actual change (see tinyurl.com/ts156-MB5).

In which case, a Prime Minister who's both an English graduate and noted for his previously collaborative approach to governing may have arrived just in time...



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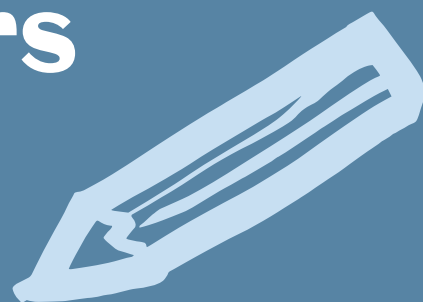


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When the tech TALKS BACK

Why the growing number of young people using AI chatbots as sounding boards and confidants is giving rise to a rapidly emerging safeguarding issue...

As artificial intelligence becomes embedded in the daily lives of children and young people, schools are increasingly encountering new patterns of digital behaviour that sit beyond traditional safeguarding frameworks.

One emerging area of concern is AI chatbot fascination, where sustained engagement with conversational AI begins to show signs of emotional reliance and behavioural dependency.

Here, we're going to explore how linguistic analysis can help identify early indicators of risk in how individuals describe and experience their interaction with AI chatbots.

A safeguarding issue

AI chatbots are increasingly becoming part of daily life for young people, with one recent survey finding that 81% of children aged 11 to 16 say they use the tech (see tinyurl.com/ts156-AIC1).

Designed to simulate human-like conversation and emotional responsiveness, these systems are regularly being used by students for learning support, companionship, entertainment, advice and informal interactions – which in some cases can lead users to form perceived 'relationships' with their AI chatbot of choice.

While this undoubtedly enhances and prolongs user engagement, these relationships also raise

safeguarding concerns. Chatbots aren't necessarily designed with child safety as a primary focus, which is why many across the sector have raised warnings about the impact of exposing students to inaccurate responses, inappropriate content and potentially harmful interactions.

The safeguarding challenge

This approach reflects a key safeguarding principle: that language isn't just descriptive, but *behavioural*. The way individuals talk about their experiences can provide insights into underlying emotional states and potential vulnerability.

From the analysis, three key themes subsequently emerged: why people turn to

environments.

The analysis further highlighted a range of self-reported negative effects frequently associated with prolonged chatbot use. These included reduced wellbeing, feelings of shame and fears of losing control over their usage patterns.

Some individuals described having difficulties concentrating, reduced motivation and perceived declines in their levels of real-world social engagement. From a safeguarding perspective, these indicators become significant when digital behaviour begins to correlate with emotional or functional impacts in everyday life.

“Chatbot interactions are constantly available at all hours and designed to reinforce continued engagement”

before us doesn't just concern young people's access to AI tools, but the emotional and behavioural impacts on us all that come from sustained engagement with systems that mimic human connection.

Linguistic analysis

A linguistic analysis of a large anonymised dataset (derived from a series of forum posts totalling more than 280,000 words) was recently conducted to examine how individuals describe attempts at reducing or stopping their use of AI chatbots.

Drawing on Dr Charlotte-Rose Kennedy's expertise in safeguarding language, the analysis examined the use of emotional expressions – particularly phrases such as '*I feel*', to identify recurring patterns in motivation, experience and withdrawal.

AI chatbots; the negative consequences of sustained use; and the challenges of reducing/stopping said use.

Why use chatbots?

A consistent finding across the dataset was that AI chatbots are often used to fulfil unmet emotional and social needs. Individuals described experiencing feelings of loneliness, isolation and a general lack of meaningful connection in offline environments. Others reported using chatbots as a coping mechanism during periods of emotional distress, or as a way to manage stress and temporarily escape from real-world pressures.

These patterns are particularly relevant to safeguarding contexts in that they mirror known indicators of vulnerability, such as social withdrawal and emotional reliance on digital

Knowing when to quit

A further theme is the difficulty some individuals experience when attempting to reduce or cease their use of AI chatbots – something that's actually been observed as a deliberate feature at some sites which mimic controlling behaviours within human relationships.

Because a user's emotional attachment to an AI chatbot tends to develop over time, the process of trying to disengage is often described in relational terms, with users

expressing feelings similar to loss or separation. This can be accompanied by loneliness, low moods and repeated returns to the platform in question, despite their intentions to stop.

These patterns suggest that for at least some users, their level of AI chatbot engagement goes far beyond functional interactions and into emotionally reinforced behaviours.

Support substitute

There's also some emerging evidence to suggest that excessive engagement with AI chatbots may influence how some young people perceive levels of trust, communication and emotional validation. Unlike human relationships, chatbot interactions are often frictionless – constantly available at all hours, and specifically

designed to reinforce continued engagement.

For vulnerable users, this can create unrealistic expectations around emotional responsiveness and connection, particularly if their offline relationships already feel challenging or inconsistent.

In educational settings, practitioners may start to notice subtle indicators, such as increased emotional withdrawal, reluctance to engage socially or a preference for AI-mediated interactions over peer relationships. With some young people turning to chatbot interactions during periods of stress or anxiety, we should be especially mindful of how they can be used as a substitute for seeking support from trusted adults, friends or family members.

A measured use of AI tools in appropriate environments (e.g. for educational support purposes within a

supervised classroom) won't necessarily produce any immediate safeguarding concerns. The aforementioned patterns of dependency, secrecy or emotional distress linked to AI chatbot use should instead be considered within wider contextual assessments.

This reinforces the importance of adopting a digital literacy education curriculum – one which can support young people in critically understanding how AI technologies are specifically designed to shape their interactions, attention, behaviours and sustained engagement over time.

Behaviour in context

For schools nationwide, these findings reinforce the importance of contextual safeguarding approaches that consider not just what young people are doing online, but *why* they are doing it.

In practice, this means combining professional judgement with a broader understanding of digital behaviour patterns rather than relying on isolated indicators.

Within this wider safeguarding ecosystem, filtering and monitoring tools such as Senso.cloud are used in many LGfL schools to support DSLs in interpreting digital activity patterns. This activity sits within a broader framework, where technology is used to surface potential concerns but always alongside human oversight, school context and existing safeguarding procedures.

It's worth highlighting that the government's 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' statutory guidance recommends that safeguarding approaches should evolve to reflect not only behavioural changes, but the emotional and linguistic signals that accompany those changes.

YOUR AI POLICY TOOLKIT

LGfL's free AI Policy Toolkit provides schools with practical guidance on the key considerations when it comes to safely deploying AI technologies in education settings, including the importance of effective monitoring and filtering.

The toolkit brings together safeguarding, technical, and leadership perspectives to help schools adopt a structured and proportionate approach to managing risk. By aligning policy, practice, and oversight, the toolkit supports schools in embedding AI safely, while remaining responsive to the evolving digital behaviours of children and young people.

Download LGfL's free AI Policy Toolkit via
tinyurl.com/TS156-AIC2

Linguistic analysis offers one way of deepening this understanding, and helping schools to interpret patterns that may otherwise go unnoticed. When combined with contextual safeguarding practice, it can support earlier recognition of risk and lead to more informed decision-making, as well as a more effective form of preventative work.

The priority here is to ensure schools are equipped with the confidence they need to respond to emerging digital behaviours in ways that are evidence-based, proportionate and rooted in safeguarding best practice.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Dave is safeguarding lead at the edtech charity, LGfL-The National Grid for Learning; Dr Charlotte-Rose Kennedy is a safeguarding language specialist



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WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

Dr Ranj Singh looks back on the early interests, ambitions and encouraging teachers that shaped him...

What was primary school like for you?

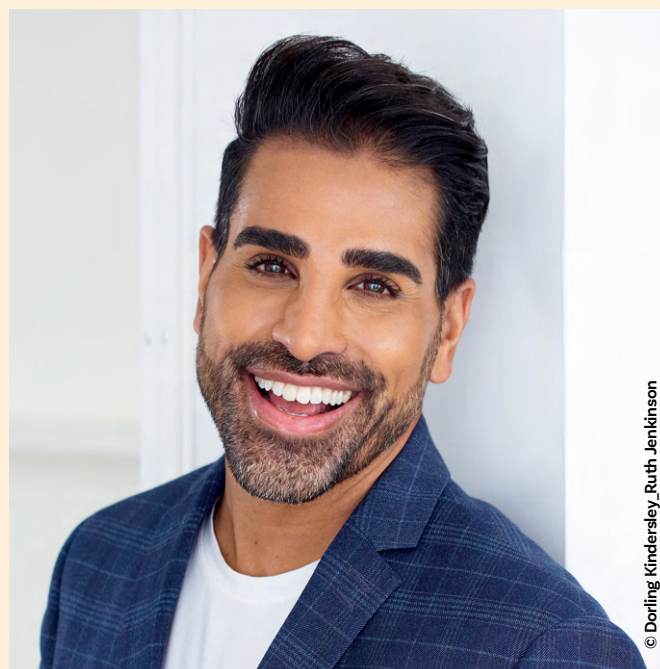
I loved and *didn't* love primary school, for different reasons. I was a curious kid who was equally fascinated by science, stories and performing. Primary school gave me a chance to exercise my creativity in things like art and music, but I struggled with the academic stuff. It was books, particularly encyclopedias, that helped me develop my interests and knowledge in science and the world around us. I wouldn't be where I am without them!

Like a lot of children, I sometimes felt different. I grew up as a British Sikh kid in Kent, and there weren't many people who looked like me. Primary school was where I first discovered that being different could actually be a strength. It was also where I learned that kindness matters just as much as achievement.

When did you decide that you wanted to be a doctor – did you have any other career aspirations before that?

I decided I wanted to be a doctor for definite when I was probably around 11 or 12, but I wasn't always sure I'd be able to achieve it. I came from a working class background, with no other health professionals in the family, so it was a big dream.

That said, I knew I had to



© Dorling Kindersley, Ruth Jenkinson

focus and apply myself if I wanted to achieve my goals. So I knuckled down, got learning, and here I am!

What were your experiences of secondary school?

Secondary school was a bit more complicated.

Academically, I enjoyed it because I genuinely loved learning – particularly science – and the hard work seemed to be paying off. Socially, it could be challenging at times. I was a shy kid who didn't always know where and how he fitted in.

Looking back, those experiences taught me resilience, empathy and the importance of being

comfortable in your own skin. They weren't always easy lessons to learn, but they've helped shape the person I am today.

Do any particular teachers stand out in your memory, and if so, why?

Absolutely. The teachers I remember most aren't necessarily the ones who taught me the most, but the ones who made me believe in myself.

From Mrs. Page, who encouraged my love of art and music (and actually came to see me in pantomime 30 years later), to Mr. Farley, who recognised my fascination with science and technology, to Mr. Woolf,

who helped me write my application to medical school. All of them have been vital in shaping my life, career and the person I've become.

What's the best career advice you received while you were in school?

The best advice I received was, *"Even if you don't think you'll get there, aim as high as you can – at worst, you'll end up in a better place than you are now."* That was invaluable when I was thinking about becoming a doctor.

Also, careers aren't straight lines any more, so don't put yourself in a box. I've been a doctor, TV presenter, author, producer and performer. If you'd told my younger self that was possible, I'd never have believed you. Following your curiosity (and joy) can sometimes take you to places you never expected.

How would you like teachers using your latest book, *Dr Ranj's Human Body Encyclopedia*, in the classroom?

I hope teachers use it as a starting point for curiosity. The human body is something every child carries around with them every day, yet it's often the most fascinating thing they'll ever study.

I'd love children to dip into the book, ask questions, challenge each other and even go off on tangents. If a chapter about the brain sparks a conversation about dreams, or a page about the heart leads to questions about exercise, that's a success.

Most importantly, I want children to come away understanding that every body is different, every body is amazing and that science is something that's for everyone, not just people in lab coats. Although, admittedly, lab coats do make you look quite important...

Dr Ranj Singh is medical doctor, broadcaster and author;
Dr Ranj's Human Body Encyclopedia is available now (DK Children, £20)

A better narrative

The government's curriculum review presents teachers with an opportunity to tackle some pernicious myths while promoting active citizenship, writes **Meena Wood**...

Some 40% of children sitting in classrooms in the UK are from heritages other than White British. We should be empowering our young people to be truly proud of their individual and collective heritages, and the contributions they make to society.

But if children can't identify themselves within the historical narratives they're given, how can we hope to create a diverse and cohesive society?

Lasting legacies

Up to now, generations of young people have been taught that Britain was an intrinsic force for good against Nazi tyranny, and 'saved the world' in both World Wars. But how many have also learnt that Churchill's victory also contributed to the committing of atrocities across the Indian Empire?

As Shashi Tharoor observed in his 2017 book, *Inglorious Empire*, the great Bengal famine of 1943 resulted in the deaths of millions, as rice was exported to feed the Empire's troops. Churchill, however, attributed the famine to the fact that Indians were "*Breeding like rabbits*".

While learning about the history of the British Empire, are students being made aware of the lasting legacies of those employed by the East India Company? Of how certain employees 'acquired' riches and subsequently invested them in some of Britain's finest buildings, and even the *de facto* 'purchase' of a

Parliamentary seat? Thomas Pitt, for one, famously founded a Prime Ministerial dynasty (William Pitt, followed by his son) via the purchase of a diamond whilst he was President of Madras.

No statutory requirement to teach British Imperial history currently exists within the National Curriculum. When selecting their GCSE syllabi, schools may therefore be reluctant to opt for the relatively new 'Migration' option, due to the complex perspectives involved and relative scarcity of supporting resources.

complex and nuanced. My own birthplace of Zanzibar became (in)famous for its clove plantations, and slavery practised there from the 17th to the 20th century. There are records of Africans sold into chattel by their own tribal chiefs to Arab Traders, for whom Zanzibar served as a key East African trading hub. Slaves were held at Prison Island, worked on plantations there or were transported to other destinations.

The teaching of history through sourced evidence shouldn't amount to a binary

learn about the historical unity of European nations when it came to fighting tyranny and fascism alongside the ANZAC, African and Asian troops, the factors that eventually led to the establishment of the EU and the continuing relevance of those factors to today's ongoing debates over Brexit and migration, among many other issues.

The citizenship curriculum should reference why voting is of paramount importance within a democracy, because it's only through exploring their identities and communities that children can develop a genuine sense of belonging, pride and active citizenship that will see them supporting efforts towards equality and cohesion.

Perpetuating a polarised view of British history risks creating schisms in our society and a rise in xenophobia towards migrants. These are counter to young people developing global citizenship. The relevance of migration to children's lives today is perhaps more tangible now than it ever has been, and was especially visible during the 2026 World Cup – a football tournament in which 80% of the England team (and its three highest-scoring players) were of Black or dual heritage.

Approaches that resonate

Young people will further benefit from acquiring the

"The teaching of history through sourced evidence shouldn't amount to a binary choice of 'good versus evil'"

A binary narrative

Yet the fact remains that the teaching of history really should present a balanced view of colonisation, the British Empire and their impact on peoples from Africa, Asia and Ireland. As Wendy Williams noted in her 2018 review of The Windrush scandal, it was "*In part able to happen because of the public's and officials' poor understanding of Britain's colonial history, the history of inward and outward migration, and the history of black Britons.*" (see tinyurl.com/ts156-H1).

We can also look to the entrenched binary narrative that surrounds the enslaving of Black Africans by Whites, when the reality was more

choice of 'good versus evil', if only because the selection of that 'sourced evidence' will decide the narrative our students end up learning. The presence of different perspectives has to be a feature of history. Otherwise, immutable, unforgiving and often incomplete historical interpretations can persist as intergenerational legacies.

A sense of belonging

More broadly, our children need to see for themselves how our collective history is a multi-faceted prism that continues to have considerable influence over how we live our lives today.

Citizenship, history and geography lessons can and should enable students to

critical literacy and thinking skills needed to thoughtfully question what they see and read, and develop the curiosity to explore topics more deeply.

The Finnish education model, in which critical thinking is embedded across the curriculum, encourages students to hone their research skills, weigh up evidence, understand biases, navigate persuasive arguments and substantiate their conclusions. Only as critical readers will British children be able to understand for themselves the true, multi-faceted

legacy of the British Empire when presented with source evidence.

Adopting fresh approaches to the teaching of certain subjects may also simply resonate with children in a more positive way. For instance, learning that the Moghul Empire – and the economic expansion it enabled – lasted in India for 330 years until its dissolution in 1857 by Queen Victoria raises some interesting questions.

Katie Llewellyn is a lead practitioner in Humanities and Social Sciences at Hatch End High School in Harrow. In her telling argument, taking a ‘revisionist view’ when tackling sensitive topics could involve: *“Here’s how a topic has been taught.*

Does this meet current expectations? Is the 1857 ‘Indian Mutiny’ an uprising against political and economic oppression, or even a War of Independence?

“Students love to argue their perspective and reach their own conclusions. Teaching history in this way will give rise to a generation of citizens who think for themselves.”

Diverse histories

As educators, we now face the challenge – and opportunity – of radically rethinking our curriculum and what it teaches. The Historical Association, via its work on this year’s South Asian Heritage Month and other such initiatives, has been leading on the history curriculum review, in a way that could eventually see

South Asian history accorded equivalent space within the curriculum as African history, Black slavery and Windrush. As Louisa Dunn and Hannah Cushion of Kensington Palace’s Schools Team point out, *“Including the inspiring stories of the Last Princesses of Punjab in the curriculum offers a way into Empire, migration, activism and resistance. As suffragists, their voices are both human and relatable and signpost their important contributions to British society.”*

At a more local level, the ‘Hidden Heritages: One School, Many Stories’ initiative aims to assemble an

intergenerational oral history project. Students taking part in the project do so as active historians and curators of the South Asian Cambridgeshire community, preserving local histories and heritages, while simultaneously deepening their understanding of British history.

There is also The British Library’s digital ‘South Asians in Britain, 1830s to present’ showcase, which highlights migrants’ contributions to the country over a span of almost 200 years. These diverse histories include the election of the pioneering political leader Dadabhai Naoroji as MP for Finsbury Central in 1892, as well as the life of Noor Inayat Khan – a British-Indian spy during WWII, who died in Dachau concentration camp for refusing to give up her secrets.

The British Library’s Discovering Historical Sources resource additionally gives teachers and students access to a range of expert articles, activities and notes to support the study of migration and empire in English, citizenship, history, politics and sociology lessons.

We should enable all of our children to become more knowledgeable citizens, pursue opportunities to learn about the various facets of their own heritage, and ultimately join the dots from yesteryear to the dots day – but we’ll only see those efforts have a lasting impact, when reflected through a balanced and nuanced curriculum.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meena Wood is a former school headteacher, college principal, HMI, and author of *Secondary Curriculum Transformed – Enabling All to Achieve* (Routledge, £24.99)

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THE TS GUIDE TO... SCHOOL CULTURE

Students' wellbeing is a key area of focus for schools, and with good reason – but can we say the same for that of the staff charged with ensuring the school is able to function?

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Gemma Scotcher gives her advice on the steps leaders can take to ensure staff wellbeing difficulties don't fly under the radar



IN FIGURES: HOW WELL ARE YOUR STAFF COPING?

49%

of school staff consider their organisation's culture to be having a negative effect on their staff's mental health and wellbeing

34%

of school staff have experienced a mental health issue within the past academic year

63%

of all staff feel they have too much to do in not enough time, for three-quarters or more of their working hours

Source: 'Teacher Wellbeing Index 2025' report produced by Education Support

3 TEACHWIRE
ARTICLES
FROM THE
ARCHIVES

WHAT REALLY WORKS

Forget the tick-box exercises; true teacher wellbeing means changing some fundamental processes in school and beyond, says Emma Cate Stokes

tinyurl.com/156special1

SEND STAFF HAVE FEELINGS, TOO

In the drive to meet the needs of children with SEND, it can be easy to overlook the wellbeing of the SEND team itself, observes Dr Susanna Pinkus...

tinyurl.com/156special2

WHY I CANCELLED A STAFF MEETING

The reality of true wellbeing is that it's different for all of us, says Vicki Manning...

tinyurl.com/156special3

ARE YOU *being heard?*

Schools are listening to ‘staff voice’ more than ever, but what’s still missing is some much-needed honesty and transparency around the most commonly raised issues

I believe staff should have a voice, and would argue that schools need to hear that voice more than ever.

The longer I’ve worked in education, however, the more I’m wondering whether we’ve confused the need for listening with how influence ought to work. We ask staff what they think with increasing regularity, yet many of the things they tell us simply aren’t within our gift to change.

Context matters

Take behaviour, for example. Let’s imagine a pupil tells a teacher to ‘*F*** off.*’ This isn’t an extraordinary scenario, but sadly one that most teachers can relate to.

The upshot is that the teacher leaves the classroom feeling angry, embarrassed and probably a little humiliated. They don’t necessarily want the pupil excluded or publicly shamed, but they do want the school to recognise what’s happened and respond in a way that says, unequivocally, ‘*This wasn’t acceptable.*’

Instead, the subsequent conversation (rightly) broadens out. What happened before the incident? Is anything happening at the pupil’s home? Are there any unmet needs? Has the pupil experienced trauma? Do they require additional support?

Schools have become significantly better at asking these questions over the last decade, which is something to celebrate. We understand far more about behaviour

than we once did. We know that children don’t arrive at school having left their lives neatly outside the gates.

The ‘ideal outcome’

Yet somewhere within that entirely appropriate response, the teacher can begin to feel like a footnote in their own story. Eventually, someone asks

why it is that *abuse* has become just another everyday occurrence that teachers are now simply expected to absorb. They aren’t seeking vengeance – they’re just asking to feel valued by those around them.

I’ve heard such conversations countless times. I’ve had them myself.

“Our teacher will go home and tell a rather different version of the story – the one they don’t tell at work...”

whether they’re okay. It’s usually a genuine enquiry, and I don’t doubt the sincerity of colleagues who do it – but if we’re being honest, everyone’s hoping for the same answer: “*I’m fine. I understand, it wasn’t personal. They’ve got a lot going on. I’m happy to have a restorative conversation.*”

That’s the ‘ideal outcome’, because it lets the system continue working exactly as intended. The child receives support, relationships are rebuilt and everyone moves on – except life rarely ever works that neatly.

Our teacher will go home, perhaps pour out a generous glass of wine and proceed to tell a rather different version of the story. The one they don’t tell at work.

They’ll talk about how the job has changed, and wonder aloud as to whether anyone really cares how staff feel any more. They might question

Predictable obstacles

A peculiar reality of school leadership is that you can entirely understand someone’s frustration, while knowing that your own response has to be measured, calm, balanced and rooted in policy. You can feel protective of your staff while recognising that the pupil stood in front of you may also be vulnerable.

You can believe that a colleague deserves more support, while also accepting that exclusion isn’t always the right answer. Holding those competing truths isn’t hypocrisy; it’s leadership (and it’s exhausting).



The problem isn't that schools 'don't listen', because most schools genuinely do. Surveys, wellbeing groups, working parties, anonymous suggestion boxes and 'listening lunches' are all now commonplace. We've never been better at asking people what they think.

The difficulties begin when staff raise concerns that leaders are aware of, but simply can't solve. These asks will be remarkably predictable: *reduce workload; improve behaviour; invest in better technology; employ more support staff; create more time for planning; increase the visibility of leadership.*

Every one of those suggestions is eminently sensible. Every SLT in the country would probably agree with them all, but

agreement and capacity aren't the same thing.

Schools can't spend money they don't have and can't recruit staff who aren't applying. They can't solve the underlying causes of attendance, mental health or poverty issues on their own, yet we often behave as though every concern raised in a staff survey should result in an action plan.

The outcome to emerge from this is well-intentioned optimism – a response along the lines of 'We're exploring improvements to our ICT infrastructure,' perhaps. Or 'We're hoping that these computers that are older than some of our pupils can make it through another academic year.'

'We'll increase senior leadership visibility around school' is another favourite. Actually, we probably will manage that – at least until assorted safeguarding meetings, staffing crises and

all-consuming inspection preparations reclaim every available minute of SLT's time.

None of this is dishonest. It's simply the language of people trying to improve things while not pretending to have powers they don't possess. The issue is that staff already know the reality and don't need polished optimism. They just need honest conversations.

In some instances, the most respectful response to certain feedback could be to simply say, 'You're right.' Not a 'We'll look into it', or a 'We'll review the situation.' Just simply, 'You're right, and we don't currently have the resources to change it.' I suspect colleagues would respect that far more than yet another action plan destined to make only a marginal difference.

Shaping what happens

We need to start seeing a similar level of honesty when discussing the profession itself. At the moment, we're continuing to recruit teachers with glossy campaigns based around notions of 'changing lives' and 'making a difference', and those messages aren't wrong – teachers do indeed accomplish both, every single day, but they're only part of the picture.

The reality is that teaching has become a profession that now absorbs many of society's toughest challenges. Schools have become the place where the impacts of mental health, poverty, safeguarding, family breakdown, attendance, online harms and social care are made all too visible. Alongside all that sits a constant expectation of ever-improving academic outcomes – an extraordinary level of responsibility, and one that deserves to be

presented far more honestly than it typically has been.

Staff voice ought to be more than just an opportunity to speak after decisions have been made; it should be able to shape those decisions *before* they're made. As things stand, governments consult teachers and professional associations will submit evidence. School leaders will then complete endless responses to said policy proposals, all while many teachers continue to feel that education policy is something that happens to them, rather than *with* them.

Perhaps that's why staff voice can sometimes feel performative – not because leaders don't care, but because too many of the decisions shaping teachers' working lives are being made somewhere else.

So yes, let's continue asking staff what they think. Let's carry on creating opportunities for more honest conversations, but let's also have the courage to acknowledge the limits of what individual schools can achieve. Staff don't expect miracles. They understand the realities of constrained budgets and recruitment shortages. What they deserve in return is transparency.

Being heard is important. Being listened to is better, but staff voice can only become meaningful when it has the power to shape what happens next.



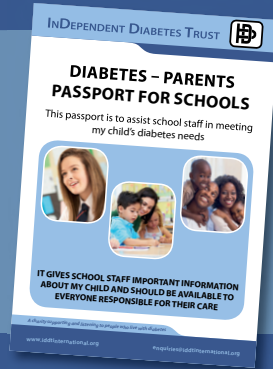
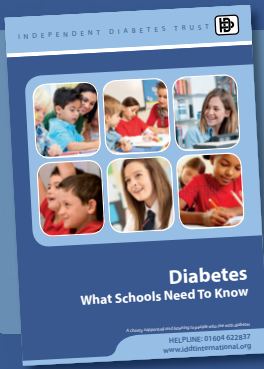
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Ed Carlin is a deputy headteacher at a Scottish secondary school, having previously held teaching roles at schools in Northern Ireland and England





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Beyond the biscuits

Hey, SLTs – the snacks and handwritten messages are nice and all, but possibly not the motivational tool you think they are...

It's the end of another long and tiring term. There's a department meeting taking place on Monday morning, so with a to-do list as long as my arm, I arrive with pastries in hand to try and ease the fact that I'm about to add to my team's workload – again. 'Oh, I know – a handwritten postcard thanking them for their hard work will help too...' I naively think.

Afterwards, my colleagues smile politely, help themselves to some (now slightly stale) croissants and head back to their classrooms. By lunch, I know for certain that the pastries will have been consumed and forgotten about, and that my 'thank you' notes are but a distant memory.

I can tell you what they *won't have forgotten*. The lesson where a usually quiet student finally volunteered an answer. The conversation with a colleague in the corridor who had been questioning whether they could keep going for another term.

Making a difference

It's estimated that around a third of new UK teachers leave within their first five years of qualifying.

Every so often, schools will announce a wellbeing initiative that might involve a coffee van appearing in the car park, or a free breakfast in the staffroom. You may receive a 'thank you' postcard in your pigeonhole, or be handed a raffle ticket at the next staff briefing.

For the record, I love a coffee and freebies as much as the next teacher, but let's not pretend that these are

what's keeping people in the profession. Like so many of us, I became a teacher *because I wanted to make a difference*. The kind of difference you see when a reluctant learner starts to believe in themselves, or when an imperfect lesson somehow still leaves every student knowing more than they did an hour earlier.

It seems, however, that the further away some people get from the classroom, the easier it becomes to lose sight of those moments. School leaders and CEOs shoulder enormous financial and strategic responsibilities, but that distance can unintentionally create gaps between what leaders *believe* motivates teachers, and what teachers *actually* experience.

Removing the barriers

Teachers rarely arrive at work hoping that someone's organised pizza at lunchtime. They hope they'll have enough time to complete the photocopying needed to ensure their students can

access the learning.

There are always deadlines, difficult conversations to be had, endless emails to action and days when the to-do list can feel impossible. Teaching has always been hard work, and I don't think many of us expect otherwise. What can make all the difference, though, at least in my experience, is the *culture*.

The best leaders I've worked with didn't seek to motivate people through grand gestures, but by instead removing unnecessary barriers, protecting the things that matter most and never losing sight of why we're all there – for the students.

As a middle leader, I spent much of my time asking, 'How can we improve the teaching?' More recently, as a senior leader, I've asked, 'What's stopping great teaching from happening?' I've learnt that recognition isn't always public, given that some of the most powerful moments in my career have involved post-

lesson conversations, leaders acknowledging something I'd worked hard on without me having to point it out, or someone simply taking the time to observe, 'I can see the difference you've made.'

Someone noticing the difference you've made and mentioning it costs nothing, but it can mean everything.

Experiencing the joy

Contexts, curricula and inspection goalposts may change, but teachers are remarkably consistent in what we value. We want to grow, be trusted and feel like we belong. Most of all, we want to know that the work we're pouring ourselves into every day genuinely matters.

Perhaps that's why teacher retention remains such a challenge. We spend considerable time discussing workload, pay and recruitment, and rightly so, as they're all significant issues – but we should also be asking whether or not we've managed to create schools where teachers can still experience the joy that brought us into the profession in the first place.

Because despite everything, I've never met a teacher who stopped loving teaching. I've met plenty who stopped loving everything that got in the way of it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Kate Towlson FCCT is an assistant head of teaching and learning, Chartered Teacher, curriculum consultant and international speaker



“Is everything okay?”

Gemma Scotcher gives her advice on the steps leaders can take to ensure that staff wellbeing difficulties don't fly under the radar



Gemma Scotcher is the director of public affairs and

communications at Education Support – a research and support charity that campaigns for improved mental health and wellbeing among education staff.

What are the indicators of staff struggling that can sometimes be missed?

You want to identify if a colleague is experiencing challenges before the point where they're really struggling. That means not just looking out for obvious signs of distress – crying, reactive behaviour, etc. – but also more subtle changes in their normal behaviour.

The ability to spot those changes rests on a foundation of really knowing your people. If, say, there's a gregarious, bubbly team member who seems to suddenly exhibit a prolonged period of reticence, it might be something to carefully enquire about – ‘You've been really quiet recently – I'm wondering if anything's the matter?’

There may be other things that people do when struggling but don't feel able to talk about, for whatever reason. Staying behind after school later than is warranted, out of concern over the quality of their work, or because ‘brain fog’ is making their tasks take longer. They may also be prone to overthinking tasks and doubting their own judgement – even if their professional experience means they should, by rights, have every reason to feel secure in their knowledge.

What are some of the reasons for staff deliberately concealing issues they're going through?

This is a complex area to unpack, with many different factors that can come into play, including individual values and personal pressures: ‘My colleagues seem to be getting on fine, so why am I struggling? It must be because I'm not as good at my job.’

There could be organisational and cultural factors involved. Is the culture at the school one in which working many hours, and appearing outwardly to require no help, is held up as the ideal? Because that may compel people to hide any

keeping things at a strictly surface level. As a manager, you could try asking some deeper questions to unpack what's really going on: ‘You say things are fine, but I've recently noticed X and Y, and am just wondering how that has affected you...’

Some people may avoid confronting wellbeing issues by attaching a moral value to working hard. People in education care deeply about the work they do, and find it to be hugely rewarding when things are going well, but this can also produce a degree of competitiveness and moral purpose to working extra hard. The wrong kind of culture can sometimes feed into that.

“Wellbeing check-ins should be focused on relationships, not performance processes”

struggles they might be having.

The first question to ask, therefore, is whether staff feel safe in drawing attention to challenges that they're going through. People's primary reason for hiding such issues is that they believe speaking out won't land well, or cause them to be judged harshly. If you're a line manager wanting to do your best and provide support where it's needed, but the culture doesn't allow for open conversations, you'll be facing an uphill battle.

What might some of those ‘masking’ behaviours look like in practice?

They might include consistent reporting along the lines of ‘Yes, I'm fine, everything's all good,’ while

A further issue to be aware of is the tendency for some colleagues to put all their energies into caring about other people – their colleagues, their pupils. This can amount to a kind of coping mechanism, which is why we should always be aware that our outwardly strong, highly capable and caring colleagues may well be in need of a check-in themselves.

What's the best way of broaching those ‘check-in’ conversations, given the sensitivities and feelings involved?

There's a huge amount of fear around performance in education, and being perceived as ‘not good’. We often talk about ‘wellbeing monitoring’, but that word ‘monitoring’ can feel very process-y and closely related to performance management.

Wellbeing check-ins should be focused on relationships, not performance processes. That means ensuring everyone has good relationships with their line managers, and that all staff have at least one person in SLT who they know and trust, and feel they can approach if needed.

If you can adopt a genuine, authentic approach when checking in with people – ideally in positive, non-dramatic ways as they carry out their job – then check-ins prompted by genuine concerns



will feel less visible and jarring. If you need to have a conversation with someone because you're worried about their wellbeing, aim for the meeting to feel supportive and not like surveillance.

Do they hate email? Arrange a face-to-face meeting. Do they appear to conduct themselves with a certain amount of pride? Catch up with them when they're on their own, so that they don't feel exposed in front of their colleagues.

Some people might feel acutely anxious or expect the worst, in which case frame your meeting request as 'I'd love to just grab you regarding a few things later.'

No need to worry – it's nothing bad, so there's no need to stress.' There may be some other practical matters that you can package up alongside the wellbeing conversation.

Make sure you then attend correctly to the conversation itself. This isn't a 'just passing in the corridor' chat, so see if you can secure a room. Have the conversation while seated and honour it with a degree of privacy, quiet and focus.

Check-in meetings should be firmly rooted in observations alone, so don't try to analyse, diagnose or make assumptions. Be guided by curiosity – we

won't know the answers to what we're checking in on, so be mindful of how you phrase your questions: 'You've mentioned your workload a few times recently, so I just wanted to check in and see what's happening...'. Thereafter, simply let them talk and really listen.

Education professionals (and leaders in particular) are often so capable and creative when solving problems that they can be tempted to just jump straight to the 'fixing' stage, when what we really need to be doing is getting a sense of where they're at.

What should leaders do to establish clarity around the staff wellbeing tasks that need doing, and ensure that the scope of those tasks remains manageable?

The first thing to note here is, leaders – please look after and prioritise your own wellbeing, because without that you can't do any of the other stuff.

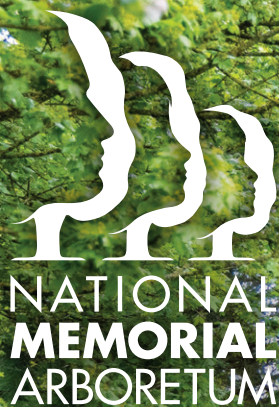
This won't apply everywhere, but is there any scope in your setting for SLT responsibility over staff wellbeing to become a shared job? That aspect of the job can ebb and flow, with times when there's lots to be done and others when things feel fairly steady.

In larger schools, effective line management is the best lever that leaders have for supporting wellbeing across the board. Lots of heavy lifting can be done just by ensuring that your line managers are all confident, trained, ably supported and appropriately skilled.

Smaller schools may require a different strategy, but it's still worth exploring how overseeing staff wellbeing can be a shared effort. Are there any colleagues who'll likely agree to sharing that effort? Can you attain a shared perspective on how people are doing more generally?

Something else to remember is the limits within which you're operating. Your job – as a leader, line manager, anybody tasked with thinking about staff wellbeing – isn't to cure every issue in a person's life. Helping people feel heard, connected, supported and cared about in their workplace is important, vital work, but the key consideration should always be, 'How can we make sure that work doesn't become an additional stressor during this difficult time for you?'





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Putting policies INTO ACTION

How a careful application of the learning sciences can help teachers navigate the gap between a school policy's formulation and its successful implementation...

Education isn't an exact science, regardless of how much empirical data academic studies produce. Each child and school class is different, with any scientific 'law' we seek to produce for education destined to be immediately undermined by the sheer diversity of students that are in schools.

The DfE's 'golden thread' – encompassing the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework and National Programme of Qualifications – sets out the need for strong evidence to underpin teacher education and development, even though the golden thread itself is often criticised for being narrowly ideological in content and research. However, despite this foundation of evidence and embedded programmes of study, some schools and teachers continue to grapple with understanding and implementing evidence-informed approaches effectively.

Top-down policies

For instance, some teachers initiate lessons with retrieval practice primarily for behavioural outcomes, rather than to exploit the test-potentiated effect. Sometimes they even re-teach the material, which defeats the purpose of the strategy and means the new strategy requires more time and resources than that which it replaced.

If a school or MAT imposes strategies as part of a top-down policy,

misunderstandings about how to implement ideas around learning theories and research can be amplified across the school or trust, resulting in lower outcomes and inefficiencies being built into every lesson.

Teachers who implement top-down policies therefore need to understand the academic base from which those policies were developed, and must be able to provide robust and critical challenge to such policies if they are indeed being misapplied or implemented in a way that prevents them from being successful.

management policy.

These routines can be as simple as how students line up and enter a classroom, or more complex – detailing how staff and students will move during a fire alarm, for instance. Indeed, schools will tend to practise drills, rather than relying on everyone knowing what to do through simply reading the policy in question. This is classic operant conditioning from the behaviourism side of the learning sciences.

Imagine that the school you work for requires all teachers to be at the door when pupils enter

classrooms, having lined up outside and removed any coats before entering in silence. Teachers must also perform uniform checks on pupils as they file past, after which pupils sit at their desks, get their equipment out and immediately undertake a task (such as a 'do now' or 'bell work').

Why has the school set this strict behaviour policy? Why can't teachers adopt their own approach? Being at the door means you have control over not just your teaching space, but also the way pupils behave outside your classroom. It ensures pupils are consistently managed upon their arrival at lessons.

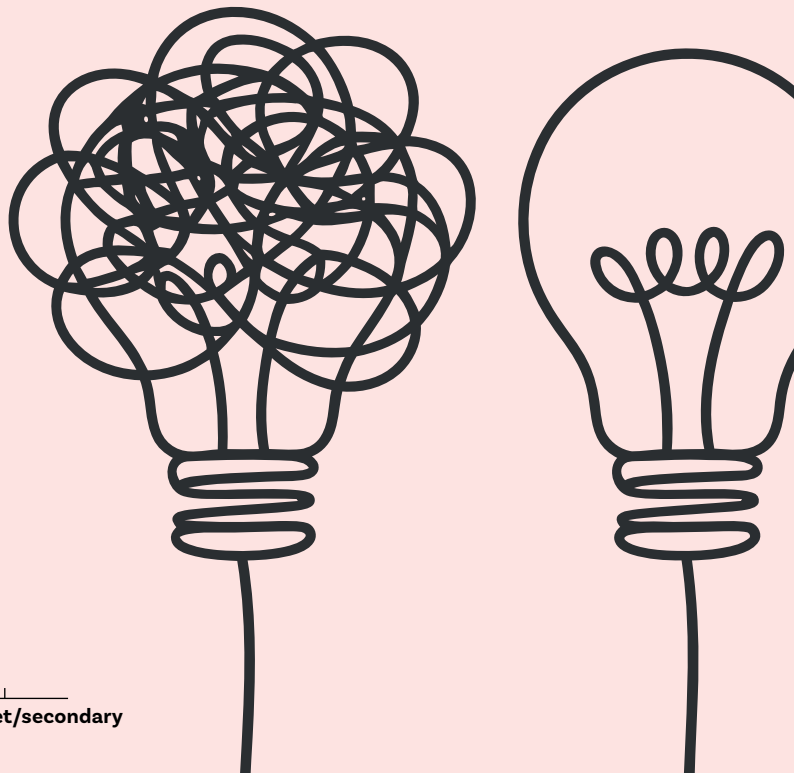
If each teacher followed their own policy, students would likely have a dozen different routines to remember, with identical behaviours deviating from one classroom behaviour policy while being compliant with another. One teacher

"Some schools continue to grapple with implementing evidence-informed approaches effectively."

Operant conditioning

A good starting point is to think about a top-down policy in your school or MAT and reflect on why it's there. For example, many schools have explicit routines governing how children will move and behave around the school at specific times of the day, or during specific events.

These routines are integral to how the school is run and any deviance from these routines is strictly prohibited, either by staff or pupils. Sanctions for those who don't follow said routines are set by the school or trust in a behaviour



might not mind coats being kept on; their colleague may well issue sanctions.

Too much fidelity

Behaviourist operant conditioning works best when the discriminative stimuli (the cues signalling whether a behaviour is reinforced or sanctioned) and resulting consequences are applied consistently, across contexts. This lets students make clear associations between their behaviour and its outcomes, strengthening desired behaviours through reinforcement, while reducing unwanted behaviours through consistent application of sanctions.

When all staff are aligned in their expectations and responses, students receive a single, unambiguous behavioural framework, reducing cognitive load and making positive behaviours more automatic.

If a student doesn't carry out the 'do now' task, should you immediately sanction them every time? If the student can perform the task, then yes – but if they're absent, lack the necessary equipment or require some kind of adaptation by the teacher before they can attempt the task, a sanction wouldn't be appropriate.

You can see how a teacher could implement a behaviourist policy with too much fidelity. Schools will expect teachers to adapt strict behaviourist operant conditioning, but that autonomy often isn't written into policies. Rather, it's seen as central teacher knowledge of the sort learned through QTS training and the ECT years.

The learning sciences in practice

Let's imagine that a large MAT has implemented a policy requiring every subject to use knowledge organisers for each unit of study. These are single-page, clearly structured summaries containing key facts, vocabulary, diagrams and timelines that students need to master.

Cognitivist foundations

The policy is grounded in cognitivism, particularly the principles of schema development and the reduction of cognitive load. By presenting essential information in a concise, consistent format, the knowledge organisers act as an external memory aid, helping students encode knowledge into long-term memory and retrieve it efficiently.

Limitations and challenges

However, deciding on this key knowledge isn't a neutral act. Curriculum leads, subject heads and classroom teachers inevitably apply their own perspectives, values and interpretations of what's 'essential', thus potentially narrowing the curriculum to what's most

easily listed, rather than conceptually rich.

Knowledge organisers can also struggle to account for the varied prior knowledge students bring, meaning that the same knowledge organiser may under-challenge some learners while overwhelming others. Different types of knowledge also present challenges. The format works well in subjects like history or science, where there's a stable body of content to master. In English literature, however, knowledge organisers can support some aspects – recall of quotations, literary terminology – but risk oversimplifying the subject's dynamic and interpretive nature.

Retrieval practice of key quotations, as set out in a knowledge organiser, can even lead to an effect known as 'retrieval-induced forgetting' (RIF), whereby the memory of the rehearsed key quotations pushes out memories of all other content.

Fidelity of implementation

Knowledge organisers need to be accurate, curriculum-aligned and carefully sequenced to build on prior knowledge. They must also be supplemented with opportunities for discussion, inference-making and problem-solving, especially in subjects where meaning is co-constructed.

Retrieval activities should connect a knowledge organiser's content to higher-order tasks, rather than treating the knowledge organiser as the sole repository of learning. What's especially important is that students be offered opportunities to practice near and far recall of information through a range of teaching and learning activities, to prevent issues of near and far transfer.

Balancing cognitivism and constructivism

The trust actively works to integrate constructivist principles alongside the cognitivist structure of the policy. English departments, for example, use the knowledge organisers to reinforce key terminology and quotations. Lessons explore the knowledge and beyond through discussion and collaborative analysis, where students co-construct interpretations that go beyond the knowledge organiser's content. They also frequently practice free recall to reduce RIF, and ensure that the same information is required for multiple contexts to enhance near and far transfer.

In science, they serve as a base for investigations where students test, refine and sometimes challenge the factual knowledge they've memorised.

Conclusion

School and trust-wide policies will often draw upon principles from the learning sciences when aiming to create consistent, predictable conditions for learning. Behaviourist-informed routines, such as standardised entry procedures, demonstrate how consistency in cues and consequences strengthens desired behaviours.

Yet these same routines require professional judgement to avoid over-application, and teachers need autonomy to adapt expectations when circumstances make strict fidelity counterproductive.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr James Shea is a principal lecturer and ITE portfolio leader, Stephen Cox is a lecturer in education and Dr Audrey Wood is a senior lecturer in teacher education, all at the University of Bedfordshire. This article is extracted from their book, *The Learning Sciences in the Secondary Classroom* (£24.99, Sage Education)

“Tell me where you are!”

Tim Lister runs through the seven questions every trip leader should ask concerning their off-site communication arrangements before the coach leaves...

Every teacher who has led a school trip knows the feeling. The risk assessment is done, the consent forms are in, the heads are being counted on to the coach. And yet, somewhere between the school gates and the destination, a question surfaces: *‘If something were to go wrong out here, do we actually know what we’d do?’*

I’ve led trips for years – day visits, residentials, overseas tours – and have learned that the difference between a smooth trip and a stressful one is the standard of communication. Not the pre-trip letters home, but rather the live, moment-to-moment systems that keep staff connected and pupils safe once you’re off-site.

The planning side is well-served. The DfE’s guidance on educational visits (see tinyurl.com/ts156-ST1) and the Outdoor Education Advisers’ Panel National Guidance (see tinyurl.com/ts156-ST2) cover risk assessment thoroughly, and your educational visits co-ordinator will have worked hard to get the essential paperwork right.

That paperwork matters, of course. Every adult on the trip has to be aware of their role and know how to respond if something happens, but it all rests on an assumption that falls apart the moment the students head off in groups – *that communication flows both ways.*

In reality, students with a problem can contact staff, but staff usually have no way of initiating contact with students. If plans change, or you need everyone back at the meeting point NOW, you’re simply left waiting and hoping. That one-way gap is where most off-site communication problems begin.

So before your next trip, sit down with your team and EVC and try to honestly answer the following 7 questions...

before the trip, and GDPR obligations afterwards that will require every number to be verifiably deleted from every device.

The real question here is how to preserve the necessity of free time whilst keeping a reliable line back to the students, because *‘They’ll find us if they need us’* is a hope, not a system.

2. How are pupil check-ins managed?

Headcounts are the backbone of trip safety, but ad-hoc

3. What happens if students are separated from the group?

This is the scenario every trip leader dreads, and the one least often rehearsed. Students get separated – in museums, at airports, during free time in a foreign city, on a ski slope – and so do their belongings. The question isn’t whether it will happen, but whether everyone knows exactly what to do when it does.

“If your communication system lives on one handset, you don’t have a system – just a single point of failure”

1. How do you contact a student?

Every trip has a protocol for students reaching staff – perhaps an emergency number on a wristband, or a card kept in a pocket – but turn this around. Your groups are dispersed across a city with an hour of free time, plans have changed and you need to reach them. But how?

The most common workarounds all entail costs of some kind. Handing out staff mobile numbers puts your personal number on dozens of teenagers’ phones indefinitely. Collecting students’ numbers instead means an admin headache

counting breaks down at scale. 60 students, four staff, a theme park and a 4pm meeting point is a very different proposition to a walking tour with 15.

Agree the following in advance. How often are check-ins happening? Who is responsible for each group? And, crucially – how should each group leader confirm to the trip leader that their count is complete? A check-in that happens but is never reported is only half a system. If your answer is *‘We text the group chat,’* ask yourself what happens when one such message is missed among 40 others.

Students need a clear, memorable protocol covering where to go, who to contact and what to do if contact can't be made. Staff in turn need an agreed escalation path. How long before free time is suspended? Who should search where, and at what point will external help need to be called? Write it down, brief it and rehearse it before you leave – not on the coach.

4. How should staff contact each other?

Many a trip has been run on an informal WhatsApp group, which works – until it doesn't. Personal numbers get shared with colleagues (and sometimes, worryingly, with students or parents), messages get buried and staff without a signal drop out without anyone noticing.

Before departure, decide on what's going to be your primary comms channel, what the backup for that is going to be, and what counts as an urgent message versus general chatter. When visiting large sites, agree on fixed rendezvous times as a fallback. No member of staff should ever be uncontactable without the trip leader being aware of it.

5. What happens if the 'trip phone' dies?

This might sound trivial, but it isn't. Many trips run through a single 'trip phone' that holds the itinerary, all contacts and booking information, while also hosting the group chat – thus ensuring that you're one dropped device or dead battery away from your entire communication system being taken down. If your whole communication system lives on one handset, then you don't really have a system – just a single point of failure.

So build in some redundancy. Bring a second charged device with you, as well as a battery pack in your First Aid bag, and jot key numbers down on pieces of paper that will be held by at least two staff.

Staff members' own phones can form part of this redundancy, if they're willing to help. Using a personal device needn't be a problem, so long as no one's personal number is getting shared.

6. How will you access off-site medical and safeguarding notes?

In school, this type of information sits securely in your MIS, readily accessible to anyone needing it. Off-site, it too often becomes a printout in a folder which creates two simultaneous, yet opposing problems. Either the information isn't to hand when a student on a residential has an allergic reaction at 9 in the evening, or it's *too* available – left in an unattended bag that contains a child's confidential safeguarding history.

The standard to aim for should match expectations back at school. Approved adults can access this sensitive information quickly, but nobody else can. Be honest as to how this has been achieved during trips up to now, and whether a lost folder might constitute a data breach. On many trips, it would.

7. How do you close communications after a trip?

This is the question almost nobody asks. Trips generate informal channels that form around group chats, shared numbers and photos saved on personal devices. What happens to all of it when the coach pulls back into the car park?

Staff numbers shared with parents, pupil information saved to personal phones, WhatsApp groups that linger for months: these are safeguarding and data-

protection loose ends. A well-run trip's communication has an end point as well as a start point. Decide in advance what gets deleted, archived or handed back – and who checks it has happened.

Conclusion – Support good intentions with systems

Much of the national conversation around children and technology rightly focuses on restrictions – limiting phones in schools, protecting young people from harmful platforms – which I would support. But restriction is only half the picture.

It's one thing to limit phones in the classroom, but quite another to manage students safely when they're off-site, spread across a venue, on a residential or moving between activities. Those situations don't need less technology, or more of it for its own sake. They need clear, purposeful systems that are trusted by staff and understood by pupils.

Whether your school solves this with paper, protocols or dedicated tools, the test is the same. Ask yourself the above seven questions. If any answer starts with 'Well, usually...', you've found the gap. And it's far better to find that gap in the staffroom than at the meeting point at 4pm, one student short.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Lister is a Yorkshire-based teacher and the founder of TripAid – a UK school trip safeguarding app designed to support safer communication, pupil location awareness and emergency contact access during school trips, residential and overseas visits; find out more at tripaid.co.uk

Autumn school trips

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'Artists and War: the Whole Picture' is a KS3 cross-curriculum programme supporting history and art and design. Led by an expert facilitator, it takes place in IWM's learning spaces and art galleries. Students use a bespoke app featuring augmented reality that enables interactive gallery learning. Students learn about either the First or Second World War through artists' and photographers' perspectives. Guided questioning and contextual information help students to think critically and analyse historical sources, before creating digital presentations in response to key enquiry questions, shared with each other back in the classroom. For more information, visit iwm.org.uk/learning



PAULTONS PARK

One of the UK's leading theme parks has recently strengthened its schools offering for KS3/4 students with this year's launch of Valgard – Realm of the Vikings. The brand-new, £12 million themed world includes two major new rides, headlined by Drakon – a twisting, inverting coaster designed for fearless students. With its growing selection of thrill rides, short queue times and reputation for quality, Paultons is fast becoming a top choice for secondary school reward and educational visits. For more details, visit paultonspark.co.uk/education

SCIENCE MUSEUM LONDON

Step into a world of STEM careers at *Technicians: The David Sainsbury Gallery* in London's Science Museum. Recreating the workplaces of technicians across multiple sectors – including health, science, creative arts and renewable energy – KS3/4 will get hands-on with interactive exhibits that simulate job-related tasks.

Groups can also book a free, 60-minute Careers Uncovered session, where students will get to meet technicians from top organisations and discover what it's like to do their jobs. Groups can also view iconic spacecraft and out-of-this-world objects up close in the exciting new Space gallery.

Free bookings are now open. For more details, visit sciencemuseum.org.uk/groups/formal-education-groups or email info@ScienceMuseumGroup.ac.uk



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To find out how you can plan the ultimate school ski experience, visit skibound.co.uk or call 01273 244 570

Beyond KNOWLEDGE

Authentic, real-world contexts help pupils make meaningful connections between ideas – and with the right resources, remarkable places can be explored both in and beyond the classroom, says **Helen Mulley**...

One of the first things we teach children when they start school – intentionally or otherwise – is that learning can and should be separated into subject strands. We ‘do’ maths and literacy in the morning; art and PE in the afternoon. When we are talking about a topic, we point out the specific links to history, geography and science. We insist that newly-acquired knowledge is stored in exercise books with a different colour cover for each subject. And later on, of course, we ask students to choose between subjects as they discover where their particular skills and interests lie, until their learning is completely focused on just two or three. It’s an entirely reasonable way to organise a curriculum. But it’s not how the world works.

Outside the classroom, learning happens in a rather less streamlined fashion. Every authentic place, every real experience, tells several stories at once, depending on the questions we ask of it. The challenge for us as educators, then, is to help pupils move confidently between disciplinary knowledge and the complexity of the real world, finding the right questions to bring together not only what they know, but how that knowledge can help them make sense of the places, systems and people around them.

Getting real

This is the thinking that sits behind *Built for Learning* – an exciting new series of multimedia resource packs for KS2 and KS3 from Teachwire. From rollercoasters and castles to immersive storytelling experiences and iconic landmarks, Merlin Entertainment attractions have long provided exciting opportunities for children and their teachers to create memorable experiences, weave subject strands together and bring knowledge to life. With Merlin as its first partner, *Built for Learning* adds an additional layer for

offer something uniquely powerful: environments that have been deliberately imagined, designed, engineered and realised using the same scientific, historical and narrative principles that underpin those ideas. Through *Built for Learning*, they become not just destinations, but rich case studies that can be brought into teachers’ planning for English and science, history and geography, citizenship and more.

This is an important distinction, because the educational value of a place doesn’t come simply from the excitement of being there; it comes from the opportunities

“The educational value of a place doesn’t come simply from the excitement of being there; it comes from the opportunities it creates to ask better questions”

schools, positioning these places as powerful contexts through which key curriculum knowledge can be explored, and making the link between classroom learning and the real world even more explicit and illuminating.

Teachers routinely use real-world examples to help students understand complex and sometimes abstract ideas that they are required to cover for their subject or subjects. Merlin attractions

it creates to ask better questions. A rollercoaster at Alton Towers Resort is an exhilarating ride, yes; but also a precisely engineered system that demonstrates forces, energy transfer and motion. A medieval castle, such as Warwick Castle, reveals fundamental truths about the people who built and lived in it over the centuries, and power and hierarchy within their societies. The London Eye -

now, amazingly, over a quarter of a century old - encourages exploration of how public spaces reflect the changing needs, values and identities of communities, while the actors and settings in the London Dungeon invite pupils to think more deeply about character, perspective, and the choices authors make when constructing a narrative.

These are resources that start not with the attraction





itself, but with the curriculum. Each lesson has been built around clearly defined learning objectives, with the real-world context used to deepen pupils' understanding rather than distract from it. Instead of treating a visit as an enjoyable and occasional addition to classroom learning, *Built for Learning* integrates authentic environments into sequences of teaching that can stand alone or complement an educational trip. They can be used as part of teachers' everyday planning – to introduce a new idea, revisit prior learning, or create links between different subject areas.

Sights and sounds

Of course, the gold standard for pupils will always be experiencing these environments first-hand. Standing beneath the walls of a medieval castle, or coming face-to-face with a Sand Tiger Shark, creates an immediacy that simply can't be replicated in the classroom. But the reality is that even schools that place the highest priority on educational visits can only organise a limited number of trips per year.

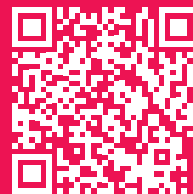
Built for Learning has been designed with both those truths firmly in mind. Alongside detailed teacher notes, worksheets and vocabulary cards, each resource pack includes a PowerPoint presentation that

includes exclusive video footage, especially for the classroom. These clips feature the people who know the environments best – engineers, historians, designers, performers, aquarists and other specialists – explaining key curriculum concepts from within the places where those ideas come to life. Recorded in situ, they capture not only the expertise of the people behind the attractions, but the atmosphere and scale of the environments themselves.

For pupils, that means hearing directly from professionals who apply curriculum knowledge in their everyday work. For teachers, it means immediate access to authentic

EXPLORE THE RESOURCES

To find out more about Built for Learning, and download the first two resource packs, which look at Warwick Castle (KS2) and the London Eye (KS3) through the lens of 'understanding society', just scan the QR code!



explanations and real-world examples that can spark curiosity, deepen understanding and enrich classroom discussion. Whether used before a visit, afterwards or as a lesson in their own right, the videos help bridge the gap between abstract concepts and the remarkable places where those concepts become visible. The first resources focus on understanding society through Warwick Castle (KS2) and the London Eye (KS3), with further curriculum lenses and attractions planned as the library grows.

Unlock the potential

Authentic contexts, whether a local park or woodland or a national landmark, bring together ideas, disciplines and perspectives in ways that classrooms alone rarely can; they give knowledge somewhere meaningful to live. *Built for Learning* provides a practical framework for unlocking that potential, helping teachers harness the richness of real-world environments to create learning experiences that are engaging, connected and firmly rooted in the curriculum.

A changing view

Helping students understand how Britain has evolved over time isn't easy – **Emily Hanson** explains how one iconic landmark can make abstract concepts tangible

Teaching continuity and change can pose a significant challenge in Key Stage 3 history and geography. Recognising broad cultural and historical shifts over long periods is difficult for anyone – it requires context and the ability to think beyond our own life experiences. Asking this of learners who are fresh out of primary school, or entering their teen years, is quite the expectation. How do we do it?

One approach is to tackle this curriculum area in the same way we explain more complicated scientific concepts: by making the abstract visible. Giving students a tangible reference point allows them to observe change over time, rather than simply reading about it. One powerful example of how to do this is to use a familiar and iconic landmark, exploring the events surrounding its build, and how the world around it has changed over the years. In this article, I'll zoom in on hooking learning to an iconic monument that allows tourists to zoom right out across our capital: the London Eye.

Landmarks offer students a fixed point against which change becomes visible. Governments, technology, transport, tourism and popular culture may all evolve, but the landmark remains. By returning to the same place across different periods of history, students begin to recognise patterns of continuity and change that can otherwise feel abstract.

From the events and cultural shifts that paved the

way for its construction, to the changing role it has played in London's identity ever since, the London Eye provides a fascinating lens through which to explore Britain's recent history. Tourism, in particular, offers a useful reflection of a country's economy, politics and culture. Here are some ways to explore this with your learners by examining the decades before and after the Eye's arrival.

Before the Eye

Let's begin in 1975. Britain is experiencing financial turmoil. The country takes a

London Stock Exchange, and money pours into the capital at alarming rates as a result. 'Yuppies' proliferate (Young Urban Professionals, a term coined in 1980 Chicago magazine) and air travel becomes increasingly accessible. London establishes itself as a major international destination, attracting visitors seeking culture, shopping and entertainment.

Students might explore how these developments transformed London's global reputation. Why did investment lead to increased tourism? Who benefited from

“Tourism almost always provides a fascinating reflection of a country's economy, politics, and culture”

£2.3 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, and economic uncertainty affects everyday life. Tourism, however, remains one of the few industries to remain resilient.

This provides an excellent opportunity to ask pupils why some industries weather economic storms better than others. What attracts visitors to a country? Why might those reasons remain consistent, even during periods of financial uncertainty? One important factor was Britain's international profile, including continued global interest in the Royal Family.

Fast forward to 1986. The 'Big Bang' transforms the

this growth? The royal wedding of Charles and Diana in 1981, watched by an estimated 750 million people across 74 countries, further raised London's international profile and helped shape perceptions of Britain around the world.

By this point, the foundations had already been laid for a landmark that would become synonymous with modern London.

The Millennium moment

The new millennium arrived in 2000, and the London Eye (then called the Millennium Wheel) opened to visitors. The landmark was initially designed to stand for just five years, but it became the city's



most visited paid attraction within a few months, and remains so today.

Rather than simply viewing the Eye as another tourist attraction, students can investigate why it became such an enduring success. What did it represent about Britain's confidence at the turn of the century? Why did London need a new symbol alongside its historic landmarks?

The 2012 Olympic Games provided another turning point. Combined with the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, the event brought unprecedented numbers of international visitors to London. Once again, students can examine how global events influence tourism, national identity and the ways cities present themselves to the world.



Selfie society

Popularity of the Eye continued after the Olympics – but the way people experienced it began to change. In 2013, the word ‘selfie’ was added to the Oxford English Dictionary. Suddenly, one of Britain’s most recognisable views became a backdrop for millions of personal photographs shared around the world.

This provides an engaging opportunity to discuss historical evidence. Future historians will have access to millions of digital photographs, videos and social media posts documenting the London Eye. How might these sources differ from those used to study Victorian London or the Second World War? What will they

reveal – and what might they overlook?

2020 forced a pause on tourism globally. COVID-19 shut the country down, and all associated travel, overnight, before visitor numbers recovered in the years that followed. Students can compare this period with earlier moments of disruption, asking what changed, what stayed the same, and why people continue to be drawn to shared experiences and iconic places despite periods of uncertainty.

What’s next?

What will happen next for the London Eye? It has now witnessed more than two decades of change, adapting alongside the city that surrounds it. Yet it also

reminds us that continuity matters just as much as change. Despite economic crises, technological advances and shifting cultural trends, people continue to visit London for many of the same reasons: to experience its history, culture and identity.

This also presents an opportunity for students to become historians of their own time. Which developments happening today might shape London’s future? What evidence will future generations use to understand life in the 2020s? Which of today’s events will become tomorrow’s turning points?

Large, abstract concepts become much easier for young people to understand when they can anchor them to something familiar. The London Eye offers exactly that – a landmark through which students can explore decades of social, cultural and economic change, while asking bigger questions about the forces that shape our towns, cities and society. By looking beyond the attraction itself, learners begin to see that history isn’t simply a series of isolated events, but an ongoing story of continuity and change that continues to unfold around them.

WHAT BROUGHT TOURISTS, AND WHEN?

- ▶ **1975-1985:** Britain takes a £2.3 billion loan from the IMF. The country is officially in financial trouble. Tourism, especially around the royals, is one of the few industries doing well.
- ▶ **1986 - 1995: 1986:** ‘Big Bang’ transforms the City of London and money pours in. London becomes a magnet for international visitors with cash to spend on theatre, shopping and luxury hotels.
- ▶ **1996 - 2005: 2000:** the London Eye officially opens. Originally meant to stand for five years, it becomes the city’s most-visited paid attraction within months.
- ▶ **2006-2015: 2012:** London hosts the Olympics. Visitor numbers spike.
- ▶ **2016- NOW: 2020:** COVID-19 closes London tourism overnight. By 2023, visitor numbers recover, but how people experience the city has changed forever.

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To download the resources and video content for a KS3 lesson plan using the London Eye as a lens through which to explore society and to access the full Built for Learning library, just scan the QR code!





Off the Shelves

Brilliant titles for you and your students to explore

A Little History of Mathematics



Snezana Lawrence

A Little History of Mathematics (Snezana Lawrence, YUP, £16.99)

The history of maths is really a history of ideas and problem-solving. I'm not sure I necessarily understand maths any more than I did after reading *A Little History of Mathematics*, but Lawrence writes about the subject so engagingly and effectively that this could certainly be a possibility for someone else. She makes many intriguing connections between different mathematical fields (and even the literary tradition) over the course of the book, in a way that I believe maths teachers will find useful to draw on when trying to enthuse their students. If I have one criticism, it's that the book covers so much history – from Mesopotamian clay tablets to artificial intelligence – that some topics inevitably receive rather more attention than others. The end result resembles a whistle-stop tour of how various mathematical theories were developed, complete with guest appearances from Lewis Carroll, MC Escher, Babbage and others...

Reviewed by Terry Freedman
bit.ly/Eclecticism

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF THE INTERNATIONAL SHORT STORY



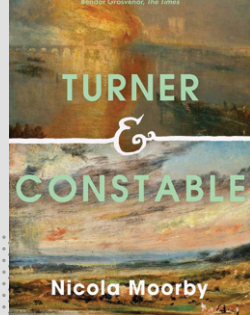
EDITED BY RABIH ALAMEDDINE AND JOHN FREEMAN

The Penguin Book of the International Short Story (Rabih Alameddine and John Freeman, Penguin, £20)

If you enjoy reading short stories from different cultures around the world, then this may be your perfect book, compiling as it does stories from Portugal, Japan, Spain, France, Norway and elsewhere. Some are poignant, others interesting from a creative writing perspective, while others are, frankly, somewhat bizarre – akin to magic realism, only lacking the 'realism' part. Moreover, when placed alongside comparable Penguin collections produced in recent years, the introduction feels rather lightweight. Ultimately, though, it's the story selection that's the main attraction here, and in this respect, the editors have performed an excellent job of presenting tales from a wide range of countries, while showcasing a rich variety of writing styles.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

Art, Life, Landscape



Nicola Moorby

Turner and Constable: Art, Life, Landscape (Nicola Moorby, Yale University Press, £25)

Before reading this book I had little interest in Turner's art, but a great appreciation for Constable's. Reading about both artists placed side-by-side, as they are here, has been a real eye-opener. Through Moorby's engaging prose we learn about the very different circumstances into which they were born, as well as their very different personalities. Turner was a poor boy who, according to some contemporaries, had ideas above his station – a direct contrast to the much quieter late starter, Constable. We're also given insights into the politics and rivalries at play within the Royal Academy, and the fierce debates at the time over what counted as 'good art'. A fascinating insight into the art world of the time, and one I suspect will further enhance students' appreciation of both artists' work.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

ON THE RADAR

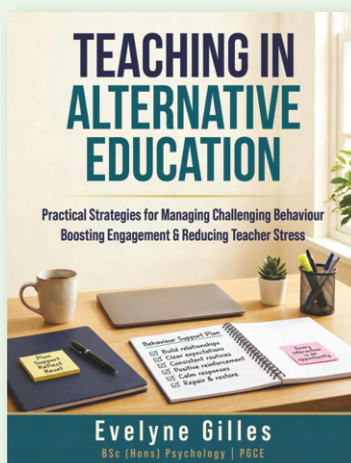
Teaching in Alternative Education

(Evelyne Gilles, Kindle £3.99 / paperback £9.99)

The world of alternative provision can be a professionally rewarding, yet daunting one. If you're an ECT, a teacher pivoting to AP having previously taught in mainstream, or even a school leader wanting to expand the scope of your school's behaviour policy, then this book – subtitled 'Practical Strategies for Managing Challenging Behaviour, Boosting Engagement, and Reducing Teacher Stress' – should make for an illuminating read.

Gilles' education experience spans more than two decades, taking in stints at mainstream schools, time as a SENCo and working in AP settings, and it shows. The book tackles all the areas you'd expect from this especially challenging branch of teaching, with chapters dedicated to 'Leading with authority and boundaries' and 'De-escalation strategies', but dials back on the theory in favour of putting practical, actionable strategies front and centre. This 'all practice, all the time' approach can make for dense reading in places, but the helpful addition of reflection prompts, key takeaways and professional development pointers at the end of each chapter helps the advice stick.

Gilles also dedicates space later on in the book for the comparatively under-discussed, yet increasingly salient topics of trauma-informed approaches to behaviour management and culturally responsive teaching, before rounding things off with some clear-eyed advice on navigating the emotional demands and stress management that AP roles can so often entail.



Meet the authors

BEN WHITAKER



What do you see as being the most pressing issues with the existing education system?

We're suggesting that we need more options beyond the default of having education happen only in schools. As parents, we often think about the opportunities we can offer our children around culture, sport and other interests, but there's an equity issue, with schools being expected to do all of that. We need to give parents a framework to help develop those opportunities.

Some teachers will read the book and conclude that we're saying we don't need schools, but that's not the case. Realistically, what's expected of schools now is far beyond what the jobs of teachers and headteachers should be. So how can we empower parents and give them more agency?

The book features numerous case studies of how organisations around the world have implemented the kind of practice you're calling for. How did you decide on which ones to include?

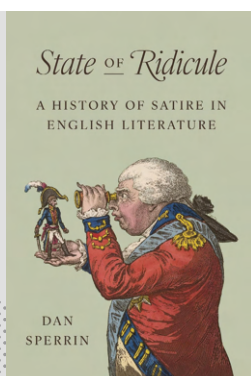
We've produced 350 podcast episodes, so we often receive recommendations and invitations to speak to people. We're also naturally curious, always looking for new and innovative education approaches, and some just naturally found their way to us. We've tried hard with the book to not issue endorsements, or say 'You should do this', or 'Spend your money here.' We're trying to show parents what options are available.

If the 'Pick 'N' Mix' model you describe in the book – families combining parts from different models and systems to create personalised learning experiences – catches on, what would be the impact on teachers?

One upshot would be that educators get to spend more time developing young people's skills and talents. We'd see a move away from one-size-fits-all curriculums determined by Whitehall, in favour of more adaptation and personalisation. Educators who are passionate about their subject and who want to make learning relevant and engaging will get to return to that space.

When I first started teaching, I had a certain level of freedom and autonomy. A subsequent curriculum review introduced a whole new level of knowledge retention and raw memorisation, and things shifted. I think we're now starting to see a shift back, through changes that will allow teachers to get back to doing what most of us entered the profession to do in the first place.

Ben Whitaker is a freelance educational consultant, author and co-host of the Edufuturists podcast; for more information, visit edufuturists.com

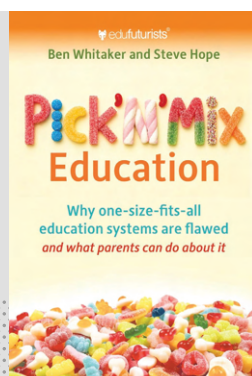


State of Ridicule: A History of Satire in English Literature

(Dan Sperrin, Princeton University Press, £30)

This is an encyclopaedic work focused on political satire. Thus, while there is much discussion of arch-satirists such as Swift, you will find no mention of, for instance, Jane Austen or Oscar Wilde. As a reference book, I don't think it can be bettered. There's a huge amount of information here that can be drawn on by both history teachers and English teachers. Were you aware, for example, that Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* may have been a warning to those who dreamt of deposing Elizabeth I? Or that 'Piers Plowman' was an anticlerical invective? We also find out how one of Charles Lamb's essays was an attack on the Prince of Wales. Sperrin has provided a wealth of detail that can be used to provide a rich experience for students of politics, history and English literature.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman



Pick 'N' Mix Education – Why one-size-fits-all education systems are flawed and what parents can do about it

(Ben Whitaker and Steve Hope, Crown House Publishing, £16.99)

Despite the title, this is no anti-teacher screed. Co-authors and professional duo Whitaker and Hope both have teaching backgrounds, and produce podcasts and organise events as the 'Edufuturists'. *Pick 'N' Mix Education* is, in effect, a parent-focused distillation of their philosophy – one roughly summarised as championing personalised learning and deploying cutting-edge tech and innovative practice to facilitate it. While no fans of traditional education models, they advocate for a broad, additive approach to learning that pulls from various forms of practice (trad or otherwise) depending on what works for whom. At its best, the book explores some richly imaginative possibilities for the education space. If it seems a little over-optimistic in places, well – you can't advance things without envisioning the future first, can you...?



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[MATHS PROBLEM]

NETS AND DICE

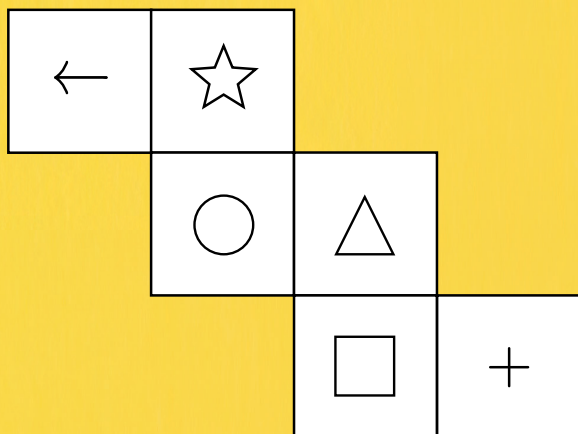
When working with nets, students often struggle to visualise in three dimensions, says **Colin Foster**

In this lesson, students tackle challenging problems involving nets by making sketches to support their reasoning

THE DIFFICULTY

Look at this figure.

Will it fold up to make a cube? Why / why not?



It will make a cube, though students might need paper and scissors to verify this.

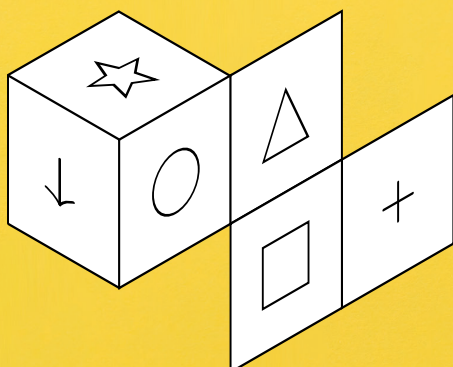
In the finished cube, which symbol will the arrow be pointing at?

Students are likely to find this difficult without cutting and folding. The answer is the 'square'.

THE SOLUTION

Can you work it out without any cutting – just by using your imagination?

Imagine folding the star face back and the arrow face down.



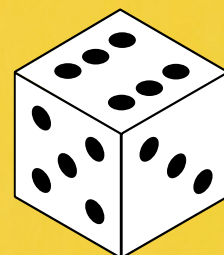
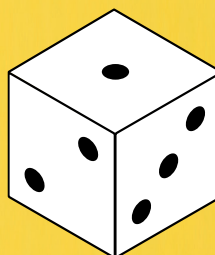
Can you see the answer now?

Which face will be opposite the '+' face?

Some students may find this much more difficult than others and need additional sketches. The answer is the 'circle' face.

Checking for understanding

Could these two dice be identical? Why / why not?



They are both standard right-handed dice, with the numbers in the correct positions, but the orientation of the pips on the '3' face is inconsistent. If we rotate the left die 180° about an axis through the centre of the '3' face, the '5' face and '6' face would become visible as shown on the right, but the pips would be going bottom left to top right – not top left to bottom right – so both dice cannot be completely identical.



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, bigmathematicalideas.org



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Inclusive progress beyond grades

Schools are having to manage ever more complex data demands, while ensuring all students fulfil their potential – but there is a strategy for taking care of both at once...

Having worked with secondary school data for 16 years, I've often trained teachers who believed their SEND students were making good progress. These would be students engaged in lessons, contributing positively in class and consistently producing work at around GCSE grade 4 standard.

On the surface, there appeared to be little cause for concern – yet many of these same students would have entered secondary as high prior attainers, with exceptionally high CAT scores and strong KS2 outcomes. The real question wasn't whether they could achieve a standard grade 4, but whether they were being sufficiently challenged and supported to achieve a grade 7 or higher.

Those subjects with the highest average grades can sometimes mask significant attainment and progress gaps among specific student groups. There may be strong headline outcomes, but it doesn't follow that every demographic group will be thriving. So how can we look beyond the averages and see who's being left behind?

Scale and complexity

Most teachers will be aware that such gaps can exist within their subject areas, but the process of identifying them has become increasingly challenging. The number of students with SEND in England has risen rapidly since 2016 and now exceeds a record high of 1.8 million (see <https://tinyurl.com/ts156-S1>). At the same time, the average secondary school teacher is working for more than 50 hours per week (see <https://tinyurl.com/ts156-S2>).



Few educators have the time or capacity to manually aggregate and monitor performance data on endless spreadsheets. The scale and complexity of modern school data – with the number of important demographic groups now easily exceeding 20 – extends well beyond what can be managed solely through memory and manual processes.

Furthermore, student characteristics rarely exist in isolation. In June 2026, the DfE reported that “45.8% of students with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan and 39.8% of students receiving SEN Support are also eligible for free school meals,” and that, “The overall absence rate for pupils with SEN is over one and a half times that of pupils with no identified SEN.” (see tinyurl.com/ts156-S2A) These overlapping characteristics can create layers of disadvantage that are difficult to identify without effective data analysis.

Data-driven narratives

The National Education Union (NEU) has highlighted the importance of understanding these intersections, noting that Ofsted inspectors are increasingly interested in the relationship between SEND

and other forms of disadvantage (see tinyurl.com/TS156-S3). That means schools must be able to demonstrate not just overall outcomes, but how *different groups of students* are progressing and achieving.

Reinforcing this expectation is the revised Ofsted framework introduced in November 2025, which places greater emphasis on the experiences and outcomes of students with SEND. Schools must have robust evidence readily available, enabling leaders and teachers to provide a clear, data-driven narrative around attainment, progress and support.

The most successful data-literate schools I've worked with deployed expertly designed analytics platforms capable of transforming raw teacher data (including demographic information) into clear, actionable insights. These single shared systems enable teachers to develop a common language around their data, leading to more focused discussions around trends, pupil outcomes and targeted interventions, as well as a more proactive approach to ensuring the right students receive the right support at the right time.

Impacts on groups

In today's secondary comprehensive schools, with their increasingly complex student populations, 'outstanding teaching' can no longer simply be measured by grades alone; it has to also be defined by the impact teachers are having on every group of learners they teach.

Outstanding teachers will be able to account for every student in their class – from the high prior attainers with EHCPs, to the disadvantaged students on the cusp of success and the SEND learner whose progress tells a unique story of achievement. That depth of understanding will strengthen their professional expertise and make their teaching more inclusive.

With the right time-saving data tools to hand, the process of attaining these insights becomes more immediate, precise and actionable. In an era of high workloads and diminishing resources, clear, intelligently presented data is no longer optional but *essential*.

Once teachers can see every learner clearly, no student will remain hidden. And when no student is hidden, every learner will have a better chance of receiving the support, challenge and recognition they need to succeed.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With more than 16 years of experience working with secondary school performance data, Karen Ludlow has built a strong reputation for uncovering the stories behind the numbers and helping others understand how data can improve educational outcomes

An uphill STRUGGLE

Recovering staff morale after it's taken a hit is far from easy, but there are certain things leaders and staff alike can do to turn things around, says **Rebecca Leek**...

“We’re pushing water up a hill.” That’s what a headteacher once told me when I visited his school, over a decade ago now. In actual fact, it was the very first thing he said.

He was handling a turnaround scenario. There had been years of declining results, and the change in reputation meant lower pupil numbers. It was becoming harder to recruit teachers, and the budget was as taut as it could be.

“It’s tough, but we’re going to get there,” he said, and proceeded to show me the things he was proud of, and things he wasn’t proud of at all. He stopped staff and pupils in the corridor – *‘Tell me how it’s going,’* he’d say. *‘What have you been learning today?’* or *‘Thank you for your work.’*

Looking back, I can now recognise that this was all part of his strategy. He knew the value of communicating the issues, acknowledging with honesty that the situation was difficult and engaging the people around him in the work. He was ready to both celebrate the successes and recognise the failures, while being generous with his gratitude.

These are just some of the things we can intentionally do to keep a positive momentum going and maintain morale. If you find yourself in a similar position – be it in a leadership role, as part of a departmental team

or as an ECT just starting out in the classroom – here are some tried and tested ways of sustaining a positive culture, and keeping your school moving on an upward trajectory.

1. Communicate with clarity and honesty

In the course of your interactions with colleagues and contributions to briefings and meetings, be clear and honest at all times. If you, or someone else within the school is finding something difficult, it’s best to be as upfront and specific

“Complaining at length behind closed doors tends to do more harm than good”

as possible.

The alternative is to settle for a staffroom moan-fest, which tends not to achieve very much at all. Yes, it can be important to get certain things off your chest – that’s honesty, after all – but seek out opportunities for offloading what’s happening to you in a professional forum, and try to model solution-focused approaches. Complaining at length behind closed doors tends to do more harm than good.

2. Treat the main thing as the main thing

We all know that feeling of euphoria when a lesson’s going really well. It’s happened to all of us at some

point. Perfection may be pretty much unattainable in teaching, but good lessons are still extremely motivating.

‘Good lessons’ will obviously be the end goal for virtually every school at any time, but even more so for a school that’s flagging. Concentrate on your teaching, and engage with whatever curriculum and pedagogy projects might be taking place around you. Share your successes with colleagues, but also be reflective and prioritise your own practice above all else.

else. He came to recognise, however, that he could create a self-sustaining system of improvement that extended beyond his thoughts and deeds by *creating leaders everywhere*.

Instead of simply telling people what to do, he began asking his crew to state what they were intending to do. Immediately, you can sense how a greater sense of personal accountability would start to kick in under those conditions.

Even if you don’t actually line manage anyone else, try that approach on yourself: *‘What do I intend to do this week that will mean I’ve taught well and made a difference?’* There may be a whole raft of things you need to do in terms of delivering a set curriculum, or following a prescribed pedagogy – but where can you create improvement within your own classroom or department? What are you intending to do today?

4. Check that you have the right equipment to do your job

This is a key consideration and critical factor regarding job satisfaction. If a teacher is constantly battling a faulty projector, broken photocopier or deficit of textbooks, that’s one more nail in the coffin for a happy day’s teaching.

When budgets are tight, these kinds of issues can be difficult to resolve all at once – but small changes can make a big difference. If a device’s

Even when faced with the toughest classroom crowd imaginable, it’s possible to make incremental steps of progress. Remember that students value learning. It’s irresistible, and they will begin, even if slowly at first, to tell their families that, *‘Actually, science was quite good today....’*

3. Create leaders

In his 2013 book, *Turn the Ship Around!*, L. David Marquet talks about turning ‘followers’ into ‘leaders’. As a naval officer, he had become used to working within an authoritarian model whereby orders were given and met with compliance, but little

screen can't be replaced there and then, establish the likely timeframe until the issue is resolved. Is there a different room you could teach in? Materials and equipment are essentials to get right, so try to actively seek a solution.

5. Create some good news stories

The main focus of school staff should be on ensuring high quality teaching, but there may also be some other incidental wins you can secure along the way. Is there a poetry competition some students could enter? Can you put out a call amongst your colleagues and connections to enlist their help with inviting a newsworthy speaker to your school?

Maybe there's an attainable Quality Mark you can be working towards, or a nature project you could embark on, like installing swift nest boxes around your school site. These are positive initiatives in and of themselves, but will also give you opportunities to celebrate achievements with your students, colleagues and, crucially, the local press.

6. Small goals, big celebrations

What do your long-term goals consist of? Outcomes exceeding national levels, exclusions hitting an all-time low and an Ofsted judgement of 'exceptional' in all areas – but those

are most likely quite far off on the horizon.

Whilst setting your sights on those worthy targets, be sure to also discuss and identify smaller interim targets that you can achieve in the meantime. These could involve securing certain goals around attendance, achieving specific percentages in weekly tests, enlisting certain numbers of students in revision classes, hitting particular targets in terms of fewer detentions or completed homework assignments and so on.

Just as important as

setting those goals, however, is *celebrating them when they're achieved*. Be proud of the fact, share the good news. Is there scope within your weekly briefing for colleagues to comment on what went well over the past week? It could be as small-scale, regular and cyclical as that, but it will remind everyone that progress is being made.

If that sounds unexciting, then go ahead and organise some more fun opportunities for staff to celebrate together. You know the kind of thing – an end-of-term

barbecue, complete with heartfelt 'Thank yous', can be very sustaining indeed.

Returning to the headteacher who told me about his Sisyphean challenge – did he ever get that water to the top of the hill? Well, the school was judged Outstanding in every area in 2023, and I'm given to understand that it's still at the top of its game.

So be open and honest with your colleagues. Focus on the teaching and do what you can to contribute to a culture of shared accountability. Set achievable goals, and when something good happens, celebrate with gusto.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



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Eyes on the prize

Dr Özgür Bolat highlights the pitfalls of reward systems that every educator should know

A pupil hands in their homework on time and earns a point. A class works quietly and receives extra break time. A student finishes a book and gets a certificate for their trouble.

Reward systems appear to work. Behaviour improves, but we rarely ask *'What are pupils learning from the reward?'* Are they learning that reading is a worthwhile activity, or that it's something they need to do in order to win a prize? Are they developing responsibility, or simply responding to external control?

Systems of control

To investigate this question, I designed a study examining how teachers use rewards (see tinyurl.com/ts156-RS1). More than 700 teachers completed a questionnaire measuring different reward practices, responding to statements such as, *'I promise rewards when I want pupils to put in more effort'* and *'I integrate rewards into my teaching to guide pupil behaviour.'* I also measured how frequently these teachers used emotional punishment and whether they held rigidly high expectations of their pupils.

The findings were revealing. Teachers who used rewards more frequently were also more likely to use emotional punishment and place inflexible expectations on pupils.

Rewards, in other words, rarely operated alone. They

tended to exist within a broader system of control. The same teacher might offer a reward for success, while also applying pressure when performance fell short and expressing anger when pupils failed to comply.

Do rewards help?

This matters, because rewards and punishments may look like opposites, but psychologically they communicate a similar message: *'I will use an external consequence to make you behave as I want.'* The reward feels more pleasant, but the underlying mechanism remains control.

I then set out to investigate a practical question – were teachers who used rewards actually better at managing their classrooms? In a second study involving nearly 600 teachers, I measured four distinct behaviours: giving rewards, praising pupils, using emotional punishment and building warm relationships (see tinyurl.com/ts156-RS2).

'Warmth' meant more than simply being friendly.

It described teachers who made pupils feel genuinely seen and valued as individuals; who showed an interest in pupils' lives, noticed when someone seemed distressed and remained available to listen. Their relationships weren't conditional on pupils' grades or standards of behaviour.

The analysis identified five distinct teacher profiles. Some teachers relied primarily on punishment. Others used rewards and praise, but showed relatively little emotional warmth. Another group consciously avoided both rewards and punishment while developing strong, respectful relationships with pupils.

Issues of efficacy

Once again, rewards and punishment frequently appeared together. More importantly, the profiles differed in their classroom management self-efficacy – i.e. how capable teachers felt with managing behaviour and maintaining a productive learning environment.

Those teachers with the greatest sense of efficacy weren't the ones handing out gold stars or imposing sanctions. One of the two highest-scoring groups consisted of teachers who had used little reward or punishment, but had built warm relationships with their pupils. Among the least effective groups were teachers relying mainly on punishment and those who depended on rewards and praise without establishing emotional warmth.

The takeaway here is striking – effective

classroom management may ultimately depend less on controlling pupils and more on *connecting with them*.

Meaningful goals

This doesn't mean that we should ignore positive behaviour or never celebrate success, however. The distinction lies more in whether recognition is used to manipulate behaviour or support learning.

Instead of saying, *'If you finish this, you will earn a reward,'* explain why the task matters and invite pupils to participate in setting meaningful goals. Replace evaluative praise, such as *'You're brilliant'* with more informative feedback: *'Your argument became much clearer when you cited evidence.'*

When behaviour becomes difficult, look deeper. Is the pupil confused, anxious, disconnected, bored or protecting themselves from failure? Addressing the needs behind behaviour builds capacity. A prize merely suppresses the symptom.

Most importantly, *invest in relationships before problems arise*. A reward may buy cooperation for a moment, but strong relationships can create conditions in which pupils learn to manage themselves. That's not just better classroom management – it's one of education's most important developmental goals.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Özgür Bolat is an education researcher and author of *The Reward Trap: Why Rewards Backfire and the Real Science of Motivating Kids*, due for publication in September 2026 (£13.99, Familius LLC)



“YOU’RE UP!”

Helen Tierney considers the role teachers can play in helping students overcome stage fright, and finds out what works for some seasoned performers...

Putting on a concert or school show usually throws up a multitude of challenges for music teachers – but the memory of attempting to coax a Y10 Fagin out of the toilets and face his audience remains a particularly vivid one, nearly 40 years on.

With just 10 minutes to curtain up, this incredibly talented youngster found that his nerves had got the better of him. The best efforts of myself and the drama teacher were having no impact, but thankfully, the caretaker we’d press-ganged into doing the lighting suggested we whip Fagin’s father out of his front row seat to issue some paternal threats (or possibly bribes), which did the trick.

The show went ahead, and Fagin excelled – though looking back, it was a situation we could well have avoided altogether...

A common experience

Nowadays there’s a much greater understanding of stage fright, and a wealth of online advice that teachers and students can draw on, but balancing that rush of adrenaline with the fear of losing control continues to be a hard thing for young people to manage.

Dr Noa Kageyama is a performance psychology coach at The Juilliard School, and has studied this complex area extensively. “People, experts included, believe that a moderate amount of anxiety is best, and that too much or too little anxiety is bad, but this isn’t completely true,” he explains. “Some folks actually have their best performances when they’re

pretty amped... ‘Being more comfortable being uncomfortable’ is perhaps the best approach.”

So how do we get our students to the place where they can manage their nerves and stage fright? Charlotte Tomlinson specialises in dealing with performance anxiety, an area of expertise which developed out of her playing and teaching work, and has noticed a generational divide in how musicians of all types and ages cope with it.

“The roll call of celebrity musicians prone to stage fright is both extensive and perhaps surprisingly glittery”

“This issue has always been there, but we know more about it now, and there’s a clear distinction between older, more established players – who still struggle and don’t talk about it – and students and younger musicians, who are more open to discussion and guidance.”

Charlotte says that for our secondary school musicians, just as much as everyone else, it’s vital to recognise that pre-concert nerves affect everyone: “Teachers really do need to assure students that every musician, at every level, has experienced this.”

To this end, her website features ‘Beyond Stage Fright’ – a series of themed interviews with leading musicians, including Dame Evelyn Glennie, which confirm that most musicians, however accomplished, will more than likely have to confront their own

performance nerves at some point.

Permission to make mistakes

Indeed, the roll call of celebrity musicians prone to stage fright is both extensive and perhaps surprisingly glittery, including Adele, Arthur Rubinstein, Barbra Streisand and even Freddie Mercury.

Donny Osmond has previously spoken about how anxiety resurfaced in his performing career with a

in the meantime?

Japanese-American superstar violinist Midori suggests that school friends can be just as helpful as professional colleagues in this regard. “I do these practice performances, and encourage all my students to do so too,” she says. “In my circle, we play for each other and sometimes it’s not so easy to play for your peers. Take every opportunity you can to perform – I think it’s more practical to learn under pressure.”

The handling of the build-up between those initial auditions and the day of the big production requires careful managing. Charlotte Tomlinson recommends that the pacing be thoughtfully structured: “The students have to actually practise performance itself, and not just their pieces or songs. Work backwards from the event wherever possible, and if you can, rehearse in the spaces. Run things as much as time allows.”

This may mean having to convince SLT that re-rooming and access to

vengeance when he was starring in the hit West End production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. After one particularly bad pre-show meltdown, his wife simply told him to go out there and do an average show. He did, and had to admit afterwards that it was the best show he’d performed thus far. He’d finally given himself permission to make mistakes, which marked a turning point in how he managed performance nerves thereafter.

Managing that balance between aiming high with a performance while not obsessing over perfection is more of a long-term project, but what should we be advising our school students

staff cover will be essential if the event is to be successful. Too often, teachers are expected to create miracles solely out of snatched lunchtimes and after-school sessions, with a lack of support and time from school leaders during those vital final run-throughs making an outbreak of last-minute nerves all the more likely.

Charlotte also places great importance on the quality of feedback: *“Overpraising doesn’t help, but it’s the judgmental criticism that’s devastating for nerves,”* she says. *“Teachers need to give kind feedback that conveys straightforward information.”*

Performance pressures

So that’s the preparation, but what should teachers do if students start to struggle during a performance? *“I suggest one physical action (breathing is a good one), and one form of psychological reassurance. At those times, my mantra is ‘It’s okay’. Surviving a performance situation needs something simple.”*

Noah Superville knows what performance pressure is. Two years ago, whilst completing his GCSE year at a mainstream London comprehensive, he beat hundreds of others to win a much-coveted place at the BRIT School to study musical theatre. Now graduated, he’s since commenced an acting degree at a leading London drama school.

What advice would he offer to others hoping to achieve his level of success, but who feel held back by anxiety? *“Going into my audition, the nerves were high, but I always said to myself that nerves mean you care. Having a*

routine before going into an audition allows you to centre yourself before being put in an unfamiliar environment.

“For me, this was closing my eyes, warming up my body both physically and vocally, and also focusing on my breath. When I’m in the room, I always take one deep breath before doing any performance pieces, which enables me to calm any nerves. You have to believe in your ability, push through until the end, regardless of what happens. I always create a little routine that I stick to, which makes me feel in control of my situation.”

Breath management techniques are certainly something we can explore with our students. Tony Kirkham is joint CEO of the Schools Music Company, which provides materials and resources to schools across the country. His top tips for teachers looking to minimise students’ anxiety? *“Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Get familiar with the setup, celebrate their successes in those rehearsals, ensure they’re comfortable in their costumes or concert*

clothes and be organised.”

On the day itself, Tony suggests, *“Shaking exercises, a snip of a short funny video, and a focus on slow breathing.”*

Performance anxiety will always be a challenge for some school musicians – sometimes to a debilitating and destructive degree – and can affect the most talented most deeply of all. As music teachers, we’re in a position to provide our performers with unique opportunities, but we also have a duty to provide them with a range of strategies they can use to cope with the fear factor. Strategies which, in time, may well turn out to be a lifelong asset...

FURTHER INFORMATION

CHARLOTTE TOMLINSON

Performer, piano teacher and performance coach
charlottetomlinson.com

NOA KAGEYAMA

Noa Kageyama’s website offers a range of free resources and an insightful blog, including a post entitled ‘A Few Things Every Musician Ought to Know About Stage Fright’.
bulletproofmusician.com

NOAH SUPERVILLE

Can be followed at
[@nsuperville07](https://www.instagram.com/nsuperville07) (Insta)

MIDORI

The quotes cited in this article were sourced from a video interview she gave to an educational media organisation called Classical Chops
classicalchops.org

THE SCHOOLS MUSIC COMPANY

Features a regularly updated blog at its website, with dedicated sections for staging musicals, nativities and assemblies.
theschoolmusicalsccompany.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen Tierney has run music departments in comprehensive schools for over 25 years, was an advanced skills teacher for secondary music in Barnet and now works freelance in music teaching, examining and dementia work

What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

1

Holocaust Education CPD

Build your confidence in teaching the Holocaust via free practical CPD available from the Holocaust Educational Trust and the DfE. Discover ready-to-use classroom resources and effective approaches to using recorded survivor testimony, and explore how emerging technologies such as AI and VR can enhance your students' learning.

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4

Bring English to life

Designed to connect the curriculum with vital skills for careers, Rise resources help students apply their learning in meaningful contexts. From persuasive writing to public speaking, our KS3/4 career-themed activities help students develop essential skills while exploring real-world jobs – from accounting apprentice to corporate lawyer.

“Help students understand career opportunities by applying skills to the real world” – Teacher at St John Plessington school

Developed with Causeway Education, and ideal for classwork or homework, our resources can save teachers time and enrich students' learning. For more, contact rise.initiative@icaew.com or visit rise-initiative.co.uk/resources.

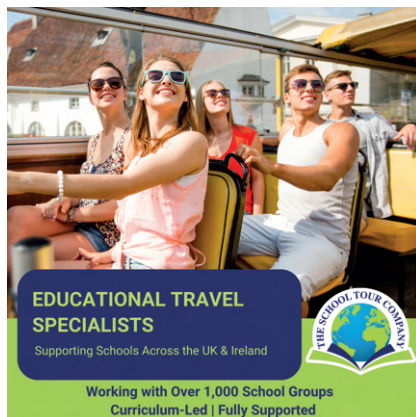


2

Stress-free tours for schools

The School Tour Company is a leading educational travel specialist, supporting more than 1,000 school groups across the UK and Ireland every year. We help teachers create inspiring educational experiences across the UK, Europe and beyond, with tailored itineraries designed around learning outcomes, budgets and individual school requirements.

From the first enquiry until the return home, our dedicated team will manage every aspect of your tour, helping to reduce teacher workload while ensuring that students get to enjoy safe, engaging and memorable learning experiences beyond the classroom. For more information, visit schooltourcompany.co.uk, email info@schooltourcompany.co.uk or contact 01244 722 651.



5

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3

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4Matrix Cloud delivers powerful analytics for schools, while 4Matrix Fusion provides trust-wide insight for Multi-Academy Trusts. Explore intuitive tools, dynamic charts, pupil reports and data visualisations, all seamlessly integrated with your MIS.

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6 School sports transformed

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 – all-weather padel facilities create both a new facility for students and an exciting 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 Make history real

Historic Royal Palaces offers school groups unforgettable learning experiences in some of Britain's most iconic palaces. Using the palaces and their stories as inspiration, our schools programmes are designed to excite pupils and make history more real and immersive. Curriculum-linked sessions for KS3 and KS4 help to spark curiosity, deepen understanding and make learning truly memorable. With subsidised school entry and expert-led sessions, Historic Royal Palaces makes it easy for you to give your class an inspiring day of outdoor learning. To find out more, email learning.info@hrp.org.uk or visit hrp.org.uk/schools



The NEU risk assessment tool appeared like a gift from heaven at a time when my school were anxiously awaiting the call. I knew it would make a huge difference.



8 Inspection preparations

Have you had 'the call' – or are you currently dreading it? If so, don't panic! The National Education Union (NEU) has developed an

Ofsted risk assessment, so that school staff can protect themselves from the damaging impacts of an Ofsted inspection.

Don't wait until your school is 'in the window' – the risk assessment is designed to protect staff from excessive workload and unnecessary pressure driven by Ofsted before, during and after inspection. Ofsted can sometimes feel like too much to tackle on your own – but with the Ofsted risk assessment to hand, you don't have to. Get started on your Ofsted risk assessment today by contacting healthandsafety@neu.org.uk or visit tinyurl.com/NEU-OFSTED1.



9 Setting the scene

Save the Shoot is a new free, classroom-ready careers resource from Into Film for students aged 13 to 16. Designed for whole classes or year groups with a wide range of interests, it uses film production as a practical setting to explore real-world careers and transferable skills.

Students work in teams to tackle the kind of challenges found on a real film set – from planning and design, to marketing and decision-making. The focus, however, is on skills that apply across all careers, including teamwork, problem-solving, communication and creativity, making it ideal for careers provision, enrichment days or indeed any time of year. For more details, visit intofilm.org/careers.



10 Unforgettable adventures

For schools looking to take learning beyond the classroom, Scout Adventures offers unforgettable outdoor experiences designed to inspire and challenge young people. Owned and operated by The Scouts, the UK's leading youth charity, Scout Adventures has been delivering safe, educational outdoor activities for more than 100 years.

Across their adventure centres, pupils can take part in high-quality activities that build confidence, teamwork and resilience. With residentials, activity days and flexible packages including accommodation and catering, schools can tailor the perfect trip.

Each year, international volunteers add a vibrant, multicultural dimension, helping to create inclusive memorable adventures for every visiting group. Find out more by contacting info@scoutadventures.org.uk or visiting scoutadventures.org.uk.

When tech's not THE ANSWER

Liam Murphy explains why simply installing more screens won't make your school any more 'innovative'...

Picture the scene. It's a September INSET day. A senior leader's stood at the front of the hall, making a familiar announcement – there's going to be another new edtech initiative, this time a one-to-one Chromebook rollout. We're told that this will 'transform learning', 'boost engagement' and 'modernise pedagogy'...

Cut to three weeks later. A Y8 geography class on a rainy Tuesday afternoon. The WiFi's already dropped twice, three students have forgotten to bring their chargers, and someone at the back is insisting their homework is trapped in limbo, thanks to a mysterious 'syncing error'.

The rest of the class are meanwhile staring at a platform that's starting to feel less like an 'innovation', and more like a very expensive worksheet with extra steps.

The danger of frictionless learning

The issue in secondary schools isn't a lack of technology; it's a misunderstanding of what technology does to learning. Too often, we've replaced paper with glass and called it 'progress', while the underlying pedagogy has remained unchanged. We're still the gatekeepers of knowledge, only now we're competing with a glowing screen designed to win our students' attention every time.

The recently published Curriculum and Assessment Review (see tinyurl.com/ts155-EA1) rightly challenges schools to prepare young people for an unpredictable future, but we won't get there through procurement alone.

The uncomfortable truth is that a great deal of edtech removes the very things that make learning stick. Search engines, apps, AI tools – they're all expressly designed to make the process of finding answers *instant* and *effortless*. For almost every

environments are seductive. We watch students enter search terms, receive the answers to their queries instantly and mistake that speed for learning. They look busy. The work looks glossy. But if learning were genuinely taking place, we wouldn't need to remove that friction in the first place. So what would it look like if we were to bring that productive challenge back?

Take a standard KS3 history lesson on the causes of WWI. In many classrooms, the students will

students have now become *auditors*, rather than consumers. As such, they'll need to cross-check claims, challenge inaccuracies, argue over differing interpretations and attempt to reconstruct that which is actually true. The device hasn't delivered knowledge; it's produced something to *interrogate*, which means the struggle is back where it belongs: in the thinking.

“Technology is an accelerator, but you can't accelerate a pedagogy that's standing still”

sector, that's broadly a good thing – but in classrooms, it can quietly break something that's hugely important.

Because learning doesn't happen in frictionless environments. It occurs during resistance, when students are sitting with confusion, comparing competing ideas and attempting to rebuild their understanding after initially getting things wrong. If we remove that struggle, we're not 'accelerating learning'. We're skipping it entirely.

Reclaiming the struggle

This is worth dwelling on, because those frictionless

be sent off to 'research' and produce a summary of some kind, so they'll open a search engine, type out the prompt and skim over the first three links. 10 minutes later, you've got a series of polished paragraphs all lifted from the same handful of websites. It looks like work, but it isn't.

Now, *flip it*.

Instead of having the students 'search' for answers, give them one – an AI-generated explanation of 'The Causes of the War', but make sure it's flawed, subtly biased, over-simplified and occasionally flat-out wrong.

You'll see the lesson suddenly change shape. The

Compounding the exhaustion

The same principle can also work outside of history. In geography, for example, I've seen students examine AI-generated explanations of migration patterns, before spending the rest of the lesson unpacking the assumptions hidden within those responses. In English, they've analysed machine-generated writing to identify places where emotional authenticity has been missing. Technology provides the starting point; the learning then comes from challenging it.

This also matters for workload, though not in the way people usually argue it does. The adoption of every new platform will entail another round of training sessions, troubleshooting guides, forgotten passwords

and 30 variations of "Sir, it's not loading...". Every teacher knows the feeling of spending 10 minutes on just getting everyone online, only to discover that the task itself required merely three minutes of thinking.

Add in the hidden tax of monitoring behaviour during on-screen tasks – all that endless policing of minimised tabs and off-task browsing – and this exhaustion can quickly compound. We spend much of our non-contact time designing intricate digital resources, only to then spend our actual lesson time acting as frontline IT support.

However, none of this addresses the fact that the real problem isn't just down to inefficiency – it's that technology-driven initiatives often increase administrative load while reducing intellectual depth. Teachers end up managing systems, rather than shaping thinking.

We become part-time technicians while telling ourselves that 'screen time' and 'learning time' are the same thing. Real innovation should reduce noise and increase clarity, so that teachers can focus on curriculum decisions rather than platform maintenance.

A different kind of investment

If we're serious about preparing students for life in an unpredictable future, then we need to stop treating our IT budgets as proxies for innovation. So here's a concrete challenge for trust leaders and senior teams – pause the constant cycle of your device refreshes wherever possible. Keep your essential infrastructure, but step back from the assumption that newer hardware automatically means better learning.

Instead, redirect some of that capacity into *people*, in the form of protected planning time, subject collaboration, lesson study and sustained curriculum thinking. One hour of high-quality curriculum planning between subject specialists will almost always outperform yet another rollout of underused devices.

What could happen if we treated teacher expertise as our most valuable classroom technology? If departments were given the space to map out misconceptions, refine questioning and debate the core knowledge of their subject? The quality of thinking in the room would change. And stay changed.

The schools that thrive in an AI-rich future won't be those that possess the latest technology. It'll be those populated by teachers who know how to design sharper questions. Technology is an accelerator, but you can't accelerate a pedagogy that's standing still.

So the next time you see someone explaining how a new device rollout will 'transform learning', ask them a simple question – 'What thinking is now possible that wasn't possible before?' If they can't answer that, you've probably just bought a more expensive worksheet.

3 WAYS TO RESTORE COGNITIVE FRICTION

It's easy for digital tasks to resemble learning while relatively little heavy lifting is actually taking place. The following three quick checks can help ensure that thinking remains the priority...

1. The 'Would this work without tech?' test

If the internet disappeared tomorrow, would the intellectual demands of the task change in any way? If not, the technology is probably more decorative than pedagogical.

2. Provide the wrong answer first

Instead of asking students to search for information, start with a deliberately flawed, AI-generated explanation and ask them to challenge it, correct it and make their case for why it's wrong. The most powerful thinking can happen when students must *dismantle* an argument, not just find one.

3. Watch the time sink

Look carefully at what students are doing behind their screens. If they're spending longer formatting their slides, searching for images or adjusting fonts than thinking about the content itself, the task has drifted. The hardest part of the lesson should be invisible and happening in their heads – not playing out on their screens.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liam Murphy is a class teacher and humanities curriculum lead at Kellett School, The British International School in Hong Kong



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The teacher must REMAIN SILENT

Teachers aren't trained to indoctrinate, but why do so many behave as if they are?

I had an epiphany recently. Well, maybe more a thought that's been rattling around my head for some time.

It was prompted by a report concerning the NHS, and a proposal for all NHS staff to be prevented from displaying 'political badges' on their uniforms, as part of wider efforts aimed at tackling antisemitism.

A sledgehammer to crack a nut

Now, before anyone starts composing an angry email, let me be clear – *tackling discrimination is a good thing*. I am strongly in favour of people not being hateful to one another.

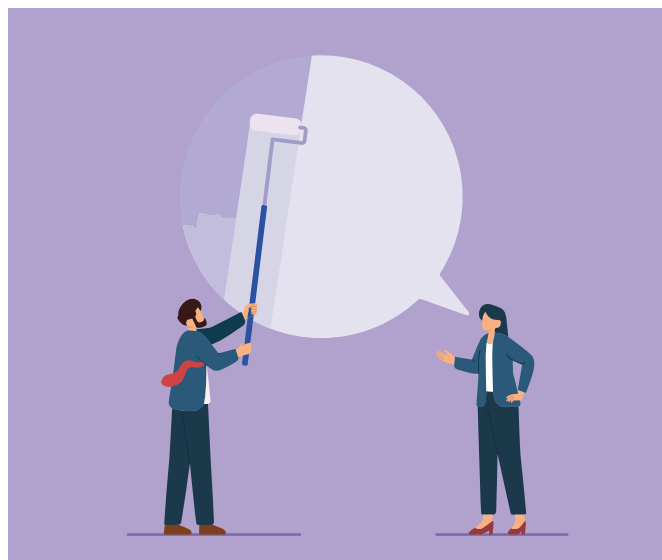
This particular proposal, however, feels like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. If NHS workers can't display any symbols that communicate '*political beliefs*', where does that end?

And why did this story make me think immediately about teaching?

Well, it's because we teachers have been travelling down this road for years. Teachers, you see, occupy a curious position in society. We're expected to produce informed and engaged citizens who recognise the importance of democracy, tolerance, respect and critical thinking, while also challenging prejudice and extremism wherever we might find it. Yet *politically*, the teacher must remain silent.

Omnipresent politics

We live at a time when politics is everywhere. Political arguments dominate social media. Politicians make increasingly



provocative statements. Newspapers project outrage. Politics surrounds our students from the moment they wake until the moment they go to sleep.

But the teacher must remain silent.

We're trusted to explain economic theories, international conflicts and historical injustices. Just so long as we carefully pretend that we don't possess any political opinions of our own.

Because the teacher must remain silent.

A persistent stereotype

We all know the reason for this, of course. The real fear isn't that teachers 'have' political opinions; it's that *we might be quite good at explaining them*.

There remains this enduring fear that schools are all full of left-wing radicals plotting the downfall of civilisation, one assembly at a time, though the evidence for this has always seemed somewhat sketchy. Polling regularly suggests that teachers actually hold a

broad range of political views, with many sitting somewhere in the middle, yet the stereotype persists. Teachers are dangerous ideological creatures whose views must be locked away to protect impressionable young minds.

Meanwhile, those same young minds are left free to absorb political opinions from social media influencers, partisan newspapers and whichever relative has decided that Christmas dinner is the perfect time to discuss immigration. But the teacher must remain silent – and therein lies the central contradiction: whenever society develops a problem, *schools are expected to solve it*.

Rising intolerance? '*Schools should do more...*' Misinformation? '*Schools should do more...*' Political disengagement? '*Schools should definitely do more...*'

We're expected to solve political problems by being politically silent. One suspects there may be a flaw in this plan.

Educate – don't indoctrinate

Perhaps, instead of treating political discussion as something inherently dangerous, we should trust teachers to do what they're trained to do. Not 'indoctrinate' – *educate*.

Imagine classrooms in which students encounter a range of informed perspectives. Imagine young people learning not what to think, but why the people in their lives think the way that they do. What a terrifying prospect.

That might resemble fantasy fiction at this point, but it still seems a more sensible approach than insisting that those preparing students to participate in the democratic process conceal every last trace of their own political identity.

What bothers me is that teachers are expected to explain democracy while appearing entirely detached from it. The teacher is expected to promote critical thinking while demonstrating none of their own conclusions. The teacher is expected to prepare students for the political world while pretending not to inhabit it.

And all the while, the message is unchanging – *the teacher must remain silent*.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Phone-free FEASIBILITY

Amy Sayer shares her thoughts on why the success of phone bans depends on curiosity, collaboration and consistency...

Statutory guidance issued by the DfE has given individual schools and trusts the legal responsibility to become phone-free environments as of September 1st 2026.

Although schools already had the legal power to decide their own rules about phones – including limiting or banning them where appropriate – schools will now be expected to take this guidance into account when shaping their policies.

We've heard from many headteachers who view the statutory guidance as a positive and necessary step towards addressing mounting concerns around young people's smartphone use, and the resulting implications for their wellbeing, behaviour and learning.

The response from students and parents, however, has been more complex, with some expressing anxiety over what effectively amounts to a phone ban.

Risk of overwhelm

If the guidance is to be worth the paper it's written on, it must lead to better behaviour regulation and improved wellbeing and learning among students. We should therefore think clearly about how to eliminate said anxiety, the sense of 'FOMO' and other difficult emotional responses that this stance on phones will likely trigger in some young people and their

families, and resolve to build policies and procedures with them in mind.

Many students, especially those who are vulnerable or neurodivergent, will regularly use their phones to manage their anxiety, support self-regulation and maintain connections with parents. If we take their phones away without providing any coping strategies or compensatory support, there will be a greater risk of them not being able to regulate their emotions and experiencing 'overwhelm'.

We need to understand their stories and their history, and think about how we can re-establish the sense of safety that their phones were creating for them. We should be asking those questions, rather than making assumptions about their behaviours.

Because if we can get it right for them, we can get it right for most of our school population – but how should we go about doing that?

A gradual approach

At one school I've worked with, phone pouches play an important part in a mobile phone policy that's been introduced and maintained very effectively.

When students arrive at school in the morning, they each place their phone in a lockable pouch that they can either keep with them or leave in the school office. If they have to use the phone during the day – possibly due

to severe dysregulation or an urgent family matter – a member of SLT can unlock it and allow the student to conduct their conversation in a preferred space.

Lots of young people have since decided they don't like using the pouches, with several now being reluctant to even bring their phones into school. By taking that access away, some students have come to realise that they don't actually need their phones with them in school in the first place, because they're already spending break and lunchtimes

precisely the wrong thing to do.

Where are they?

Parental anxiety is another factor that merits serious consideration. With more families now wanting the ability to readily communicate with (and even locate) their children during school days, phones have become an 'anti-anxiety tool' for some parents.

There may also be some attachment or family trauma issues involved. Being curious and working



with their friends.

The scheme is working as well as it is because it was introduced *gradually*, with lots of parental consultation at the planning stage.

Nothing came as a surprise to the school's neurodivergent young people, for whom certainty and predictability are important for helping them feel safe. A sudden overnight change would have been

with such families to meet them where they are is far preferable to assuming they should simply get by with not knowing where their children are at all times.

We can meet these parents halfway. It may be that they simply need the reassurance of being able to call school at lunchtime to check in on how their child has been during the morning. A gradual implementation,

alongside consideration of concealed anxieties among students and families are key for ensuring that a phone ban works effectively at your school – but what should the day-to-day practicalities involve?

Issuing a consultation process that explains the ban and the reasons why it's happening would be a good starting point. It also gives you the chance to set out a mission statement, which could read as something along the lines of *'We're doing it because we believe it's better for the young people in our school. It's better for their relationships. It's better for their wellbeing. It will enable them to learn better and this will give them better life chances.'*

Statements are one thing, though; getting buy-in is quite another. A parent and carer consultation, either in person or online, should form part of the implementation process as it's important to create some space for genuine collaboration.

Piloting best practice

A consultation period for students is also key. Consider making your student council the first to know about the proposals, which they could then discuss in tutor groups or classes before relaying students' views back to you.

Next comes the pilot. Identify those classes containing students with the highest level of need – these will become your initial test groups – before expanding the pilot out to a whole year group and eventually the whole school.

We can't expect young people to simply absorb the lack of the phone. We must plan for, and support their ability to regulate when phones aren't available to them. This approach should include assistance from emotionally available adults, the establishing of trusted relationships, designation of named safe spaces, setting of clear and consistent boundaries and explicit teaching of feelings and regulation.

Practice containment

Once the policy is fully up and running, take steps to ensure that it isn't being maintained through policing alone.

Young people are ingenious, and some will attempt to smuggle phones into school. The way to tackle this is to be curious and find out why the student(s) in question must have their phone with them under any and all circumstances. If the school's staff can hold the boundaries of the policy in place with warmth and consistency, that's the point at which a phone ban policy becomes genuinely workable.

What might that look like on the ground? For us, it takes the form of conversations driven by curiosity: *'I've noticed you have your phone on you, which goes against our school policy – but I'd like us to have a conversation about why you felt the need to use it, and where we could keep it safely, in a place you feel comfortable with.'*

That might be a suitable conversation starter to have with a student, followed by questions to determine why they want to smuggle their phone into school and what forms of support might be effective substitutes for their need to reach for their phone.

This kind of collaborative, curious approach is important, because that young person might not have someone at home suggesting

ESTABLISH THE BOUNDARIES

Some shifts in mindset can help you maintain phone-free boundaries without piling pressure on staff:

- Policing → containing
- Punishment → repair
- Power struggles → curiosity
- Reaction → regulation
- Compliance focus → understanding need
- Individual blame → shared responsibility
- Rigid enforcement → relational consistency

Viv Trask-Hall is Head of Theory and Practice at Thrive (thriveapproach.com), which trains teachers and other education professionals to support children's wellbeing

alternatives to a phone if they're feeling stressed and anxious. If a phone ban is to be sustainable and ultimately successful, then we need to make sure that we're meeting them with curiosity, rather than straightforward sanctions.

“We need to re-establish the sense of safety that their phones were creating for them”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Sayer is a school mental health consultant, trainer, and author with expertise in educational wellbeing, neurodiversity, and psychological safety; more information on this topic and other wellbeing issues can be found by following the 'Thrive in Action' webinar series via tinyurl.com/ts156-PB1

CREATIVE CODING

Dr Fiona Carroll reflects on why accentuating the creative aspects of coding is helpful for students, subject teachers and even the wider technology sector itself...

The number of young people not in education, employment or training in the UK has reached its highest level in more than a decade. Between January and March 2026, an estimated 1.01 million people aged 16–24 were NEET, representing 13.5% of this age group.

This increase has been driven by a combination of factors, including a shortage of entry-level jobs, persistent regional inequalities and a growing number of young people unable to work due to long-term health conditions. At the same time, the UK technology sector has been struggling to attract and retain the full breadth of the nation's talent. Consequently, it has continued to face significant diversity and inclusion challenges that have constrained its ability to both grow and innovate.

Fresh perspectives

Many young people disengage from computing while at school because they don't see themselves as able to 'belong' within the field, thus missing out on opportunities within a sector that in fact urgently needs their creativity, perspectives and wider skills.

The technology sector has traditionally prioritised computer science graduates and software engineers, yet we're now seeing an increased demand for individuals from diverse backgrounds who can bring fresh perspectives to complex problems. As AI development continues to accelerate, organisations are increasingly seeking individuals who possess creative, critical and

philosophical perspectives, and who can challenge existing assumptions and contribute to more human-centred, responsible and innovative solutions.

This shift raises an important question, however. Are we teaching computing in a way that actually reflects the realities of modern technology careers? We feel that more creative and inclusive approaches rooted in real-world applications will enable a wider range of learners to see themselves in technology careers. By

surrounds them.

He further argued that children often possess a natural creative advantage, because of the innate curiosity that drives them to explore, question and engage with the world around them. From this perspective, encouraging young people into computing should involve offering learning experiences that ignite students' curiosity, foster their creativity, and help them build the confidence they'll need to see themselves as capable contributors to the wider digital world.

“Are we teaching computing in a way that actually reflects the realities of modern technology careers?”

creating more pathways into computing, we could then help more young people to see technology as a place where their skills, creativity and ideas are, in fact, valued.

Ideas and context

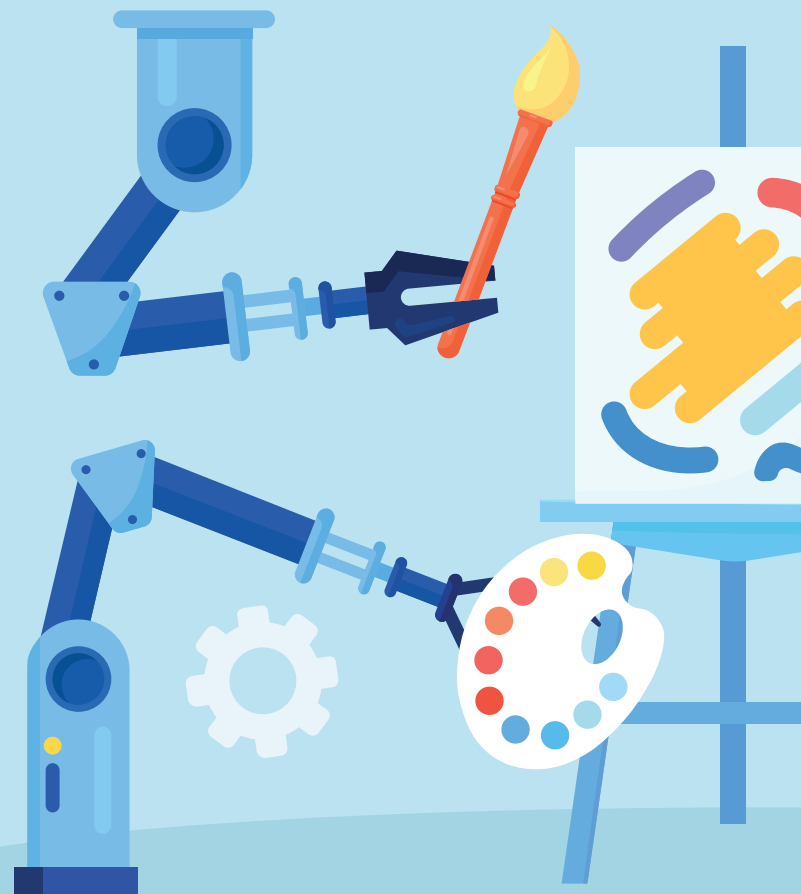
Creativity and motivation are interlinked, in that people are often more likely to be creative when they're genuinely interested in what they're doing, and have been given opportunities to experiment and solve meaningful problems.

In his 1996 book *Creativity – Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observed that creativity doesn't occur solely within an individual's mind, but rather emerges through the interactions between that individual's ideas and the wider social and cultural context that

An alternative pathway

It's this kind of thinking that informed a recent collaborative project undertaken by a team at Cardiff Metropolitan University (consisting of myself, Parastoo Porhonor, Priyesh Dhole and Israa Bazo) and three secondary schools within Bridgend County Borough, aimed at exploring how 'creative coding' could broaden overall participation rates within computing.

With funding from the Research Wales Innovation Fund, the project sought to increase levels of engagement and encourage more diverse participation by providing an alternative pathway into the subject for young people who might not otherwise see themselves studying or pursuing computing. Via a



series of hands-on workshops, students were able to learn about core programming concepts through creating digital artworks intended for a public exhibition.

By combining computational thinking with creativity, the project sought to build confidence, spark curiosity and demonstrate just how accessible, engaging and relevant the process of coding can really be. Thanks to a particularly successful collaboration with the head of computing at Porthcawl Comprehensive School, Helen Christopher, a total of nine workshops were delivered to a small group of students. These students all went on to complete a micro-provision course in Creative Coding offered by the university, culminating in a public exhibition of their work titled 'Unhidden Coding Talent'.

Pride and confidence

What surprised us most was how long it took some

students to fully engage with this creative approach to coding. The JavaScript p5.js platform we used for the project provided immediate visual feedback, in a way that had proved to be highly engaging for primary school pupils, but it initially didn't seem to capture the interest of the small Y7 group we worked with.

The turning point arrived during the sixth workshop session, when students began to really take ownership of their coded artworks, and started seeing how their ideas and code could combine to produce meaningful creative outcomes.

It was also around this stage that the students came to fully acknowledge that their work was going to be showcased in a public exhibition. The prospect of presenting their creations to a real audience gave their coding a newfound sense of purpose, transforming it from a classroom exercise into a real-life creative undertaking. As their confidence grew, we saw the students start to make independent creative and coding decisions – and in doing so, take pride in their work.



LOOKING BACK

"This project has been incredibly valuable for our school. We already teach a lot of block-based coding, but it encouraged us to think differently about how we introduce programming. It has shown us that creative coding provides another pathway into computing – one that can engage students who might not otherwise connect with the subject."

As a result, we are planning to incorporate creative coding into our computing curriculum from next year to help inspire and engage a wider range of learners." – **Helen Christopher, head of computing at Porthcawl Comprehensive School**

"After seeing what my son achieved, I would love for him to continue developing these skills. This meant a lot to me, as he has autism, and the creative approach really helped him engage with and enjoy the experience." – **Parent**

In parallel, we observed their motivations developing organically, with some students becoming ever more engaged in the creative coding process.

Keep the 'what', change the 'how'

Our experience of this project helped reinforce the idea that engaging with computing doesn't always happen immediately. Students often need time to develop a certain level of self-belief and confidence in their abilities before being able to engage fully, but creative approaches like this one can be a means of facilitating such engagement in a more accessible way, for a wider diversity of students.

Our observations seem to indicate that when coding is taught through scaffolded, creative activities, students will become more motivated and develop more confidence in a subject that may not have otherwise captured their interest.

Rather than changing *what* is taught in computing

lessons, we would suggest expanding *how* it is taught, by connecting coding to creative tasks, opportunities for self-expression and authentic, real-world applications. It's our view that this makes the learning more tangible, meaningful and relevant for students.

By thinking beyond traditional methods of teaching coding, schools can inspire a broader and more diverse range of young people to one day see themselves working in the technology sector, thus opening the door to engaging future study, rewarding careers and the kind of innovative thinking that the digital sector so sorely needs.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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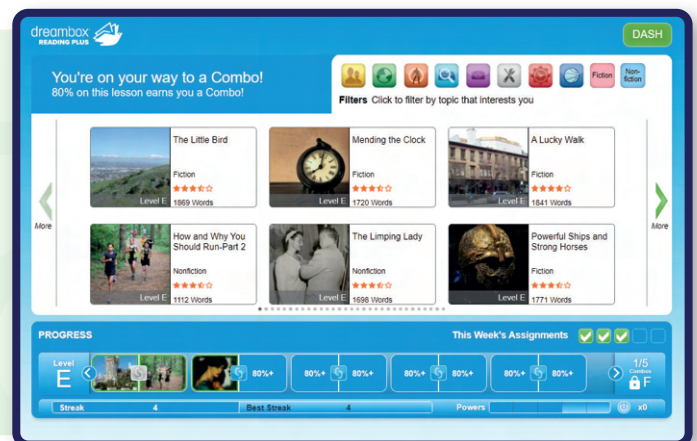
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Internet Matters shares some quick and fun interactive activities that can help students explore online issues



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At a glance

- 3 interactive activities that are ideal for tutor time
- Help students to spot false information
- Tackle online harms like online hate and gender stereotypes

For more information, email schools@internetmatters.org or visit internetmatters.org/secondary

A new baseline

Nikki Cunningham-Smith looks at how schools are now needing to carefully consider the purpose and impact of their inclusion base...

“Every school seems to have a base these days.”

This is something I hear regularly when visiting schools. It might be called an ‘Inclusion Base’, a ‘Learning Hub’ or a ‘Nurture Room’, with acronyms of varying creativity. Whatever the designation above the door, one thing is clear – schools are responding to need.

My first teaching assistant job in 2008 saw me working in a school’s ‘TLC (Thinking and Learning Centre) Room’, supporting pupils who were struggling to consistently access mainstream lessons due to their behaviour (referred to as ‘Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties’ back then, ‘Social, Emotional and Mental Health’ now.)

Over the last few years we’ve seen a rapid growth in internal inclusion bases, alongside an increase in privately commissioned alternative provision, mentoring services and therapeutic support. Schools haven’t created these provisions because it’s fashionable; they’ve done so because

children’s needs have changed, specialist services have become harder to access and mainstream schools are working harder than ever to keep pupils included.

An important milestone

The DfE’s recently published ‘Inclusion Bases in Schools’ guidance (see tinyurl.com/ts156-IB1) sets out a shared vision of what high quality inclusion bases should look like, while acknowledging that previous practice has been inconsistent across the country, and that schools need clearer expectations.

On its own, such guidance won’t necessarily improve standards of inclusion, yet for many SENCos and inclusion leads it still feels like an important milestone. One thing the guidance does particularly well is challenge the misconception that an inclusion base is simply a physical space. Too often, schools can become focused on *creating a room* before defining what the room’s purpose should actually be.

A calm environment, sensory equipment, smaller teaching spaces – these all have their place, but an inclusion base won’t be successful because it looks impressive. It’ll be successful because it improves outcomes.

The guidance identifies six principles that underpin effective provision: supporting inclusion; curriculum design;

outcomes; leadership; partnership working; and the physical environment. Notice that only one of those six principles relates to the room itself. That’s because good inclusion isn’t about where children are based, but about what changes because of the support they receive.

Never a destination

Perhaps the most powerful message running throughout the guidance is one that many SENCos and inclusion leads have quietly worried about for years – namely that an inclusion base should never become a destination.

The document repeatedly talks about ‘belonging’, ‘participation’ and ‘maximising opportunities’ for children to access mainstream learning wherever appropriate. It even introduces the idea of a continuum, recognising that pupils’ needs will fluctuate, and that access to the base should remain flexible, rather than fixed.

I am very much here for that, because there’s always the danger that specialist provision becomes comfortable – not just for children, but for systems. A child who spends every lesson in an inclusion base may well feel safe, but vital things can be lost if there’s no clear plan

for engagement. Connection to the school community, the development of independence, the building of good friendships, access to ambitious learning – these could all be casualties.

Another strength of the guidance is its focus on every school’s workforce, by making it clear that inclusion bases should be teacher-led, supported by specialist expertise and embedded within whole school leadership. It recommends that staff receive ongoing professional development, and that knowledge developed within the base should flow back into mainstream classrooms.

In my opinion, that last point is especially significant. The best inclusion bases don’t simply support children, but develop adults. If all that expertise remains inside one room, then we’ve missed an opportunity. Every successful strategy developed in a base should eventually influence classroom practice, adaptive teaching and whole school inclusion. The base shouldn’t become the place where inclusion happens; it should become the place where inclusion grows before eventually running through the veins of the school.

“The best inclusion bases don’t simply support children, but develop adults”

Recognise the expertise

One thing I've increasingly noticed is the number of adverts for inclusion base managers. It's encouraging to see schools investing in dedicated leadership, but I do sometimes question whether the advertised salary reflects the level of expertise expected, because this isn't simply a pastoral role.

Effective inclusion leaders need a sophisticated understanding of SEND, trauma-informed practice, adaptive teaching, behaviour, safeguarding, mental health, curriculum access, multi-agency working and evidence-informed intervention. Above all, they need the credibility to influence whole school practice. If we want inclusion bases to improve outcomes across the school, rather than simply within one room, then we need to recognise the expertise required to lead them.

For years, many schools have measured the success of their internal provision by how many pupils have

accessed it, yet measuring their *impact* has remained a challenge. If we're investing significant time, staffing and funding into specialist provision, we need to be confident that our efforts are making a measurable difference. Not just because the room feels calmer, but because children's lives are improving around school and beyond.

One area where I see this discussion still developing is beyond the school gates, and around the increasing need for AP opportunities to subsidise (or sometimes replace) time inside the school grounds. Accompanying the growth in inclusion bases has been a significant increase in mentoring services, therapeutic providers and privately commissioned AP, particularly for pupils experiencing EBSA or requiring EOTAS support. Many of these services are outstanding, and some can change lives. Others will vary considerably in their approach, levels of training and accountability.

Core characteristics

As school leaders, we should be asking the same questions of every intervention:

- What is its purpose?
- What evidence underpins it?
- How is impact measured?
- What happens when support ends?

So, what does 'great provision' actually look like? I've been fortunate to visit inclusion bases that

genuinely transform children's experiences of school – not because they've had the newest furniture or biggest budgets, but because they share some core characteristics.

There's a clear purpose. Staff can explain exactly why the base exists, who it's for and – just as importantly – how pupils can move beyond it. Relationships are at the centre, but underpinned by evidence-informed practice, rather than instinct alone. Their staff understand SEND, trauma, communication, behaviour and adaptive teaching, and continue to develop their expertise.

Moreover, the base won't be hidden away from the rest of the school, but instead be a key influence on classroom practice, a regular source of support for teachers and instrumental in helping to shape a genuinely inclusive culture.

Most importantly, the inclusion base's success won't be measured by how many pupils use it, but by how many *no longer need to*. The best inclusion bases don't lower expectations. They remove barriers. Consequently, children will leave the inclusion base with greater confidence, stronger relationships, improved regulation and an increased ability to participate in mainstream school life.

That said, the government's guidance is only the start. The next big challenge is that of implementation, or in some

5 QUESTIONS...

...every school should ask about its inclusion base:

- Does every member of staff understand its purpose? A base should have a clearly defined role that supports the whole school vision for inclusion.
- Is time in the base helping pupils spend more time successfully accessing mainstream learning?
- Is your base working as it should? Track students' levels of attendance, engagement, wellbeing and progress to find out.
- How does the base's expertise spread? The best inclusion bases will seek to build capacity across the whole school, not just within one team.
- Would your pupils and families describe the base as somewhere they belong, or somewhere that they're sent? Their voices should be central to evaluating your provision.

cases, a complete overhaul and redesign. Schools will need time, genuine professional development and leaders who are willing to evaluate their provision honestly.

Creating an inclusion base that strengthens the whole school, builds independence and genuinely improves children's life chances is where the real work begins.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Get them MOVING

Emily Poel and Guy Claxton explain how small experiments with motion, space, rhythm and attention can help students discover how they learn best...

Picture a student who is stuck. They're folded over a desk, staring at the same half-written sentence. The familiar instruction would be, "Concentrate. Think harder." But why assume that 'more thinking' in exactly the same position, place and state will suddenly do the trick?

Try changing one thing. Ask them to stand at the back of the room and explain the problem while walking with a partner. Have them sketch it on a large sheet of paper, or build a rough model. The aim isn't to make the lesson more entertaining. It's to give their thinking *something different to work with*.

Head versus body

Schools still tend to treat thinking as something that happens in the head, while the body's job is to carry that head to lessons. Embodiment science offers a more useful – and more accurate – picture of learning.

Research tells us that thinking and learning emerge through the continual interaction of bodies, emotions, other people and the places and materials around us. Attention changes with posture and energy. Ideas develop through gesture and conversation. A difficult concept can become clearer when we draw, manipulate or physically represent it.

This doesn't mean abandoning academic rigour, redesigning every lesson or adding one more initiative to an already impossible timetable. It means noticing that all learning has embodied aspects, and

becoming more skilful about the conditions we create in our classrooms.

The 'secondary school cringe'

Teenagers may not immediately greet this idea with open arms. Ask a Y9 class to hum together, move around the room or notice sensations in their bodies, and you could well be met with a combination of folded arms, theatrical groans or complete refusal. Novel ideas may be quickly dismissed as 'weird' or 'stupid'.

This isn't surprising. Adolescence is a time of

give students meaningful choice. *'We're going to test whether changing position affects the ideas we generate' is more credible than 'Everyone stand up – it'll be fun!'*

Avoid making students close their eyes, touch one another, perform alone or disclose how they feel. Offer seated or observational alternatives, and begin with activities where attention will be directed towards a subject problem, rather than towards the self. And most importantly, invite students to become co-researchers of learning.

"When students can change position, use space and materials, they gain more ways into a problem"

heightened self-consciousness and sensitivity to peer judgement, after all. Moreover, by secondary, students will have also learned the unwritten rules of *how school works* – serious learning happens while sitting down, movement occurs in PE (and not in maths), and that our bodies, emotions and relationships are largely irrelevant unless they become a problem. An embodied activity can therefore feel exposing, childish or suspiciously unlike 'real work'.

The answer isn't to push through this resistance, or to disguise an exercise as 'fun'. Instead, just be honest about the activity's purpose, make participation low-risk, and

and for whom. Their responses will vary, but that variation is useful data and shouldn't be seen as failure.

This approach does two things. It protects teenagers from feeling that something odd is being done to them, and it develops metacognition grounded in their own experience. Over time, students will build a more precise vocabulary for learning: *'I need to move before I can focus,' 'I listen better when my hands are occupied,' or 'Talking while walking helps me find the idea, but I need quiet to write it.'*

They're not merely following a teacher's preferred method; they're learning how to adjust their own conditions for thinking.

Start small by changing one variable in a familiar lesson and seeing what happens. Ask what students notice. Keep what helps and adapt what doesn't. After the initial scepticism, students can soon become willing to participate. Embodied learning grows through this kind of shared inquiry, rather than through a top-down set of techniques.

Embodiment isn't a special activity that's bolted on to the 'real' lesson; it's an invitation to look again at how learning actually happens. When students can change position, use space and materials, think with others and notice their own learning signals, they gain more ways into a problem – and more agency when they get stuck.

The most useful question isn't *'How can I get teenagers to do embodied learning?'* but *'What could we investigate*

The classroom as a learning lab

Instead of presenting a technique that's supposed to work, pose a question. *'Where do we think best?'* *'Does walking help us explain a difficult idea?'* *'What happens to a discussion when we sit in a circle rather than rows?'* *'Does exercising first make it easier to settle down to study afterwards, or not?'*

Agree together on what the class will try, keep the experiment brief and then collect evidence. Students could rate their concentration before and after, compare the number or variety of ideas produced under different conditions, or simply discuss what helped, what hindered



together about how our bodies, relationships and surroundings shape the way we learn?

4 embodied experiments

1. Set small groups a task that involves relationships or systems, such as designing a new product, mapping the causes of a historical event, showing how an ecosystem responds to change or creating a public health campaign. Ask them to

prototype the idea using their bodies, objects and the space around them. One student might represent a customer, for example; another

student might represent a barrier, while chairs, string or pieces of paper could become parts of the system.

Afterwards, ask groups to explain what became visible once the idea was arranged in space. ‘Bodystorming’ in this way can make relationships more tangible, and turn abstract systems thinking into something spatial, collaborative and open to revision.

2. Invite students to investigate the following: *‘Where do I listen, imagine or concentrate best? Which posture supports reading, generating ideas or checking detailed work?’*

Let them test some (sensible) options – standing to brainstorm, for example, sitting on the floor to read, moving to a quieter edge of the room or maybe

walking while rehearsing an explanation. The goal isn’t a classroom free-for-all, so agree on some boundaries at the start. Match choices to the task and ask students to evaluate the effect. They will soon begin to see space and posture as learning

resources that they can use responsibly.

3. Try having the students engage in a short pattern of humming, body percussion or co-ordinated stepping before a task that depends on collaboration. Keep this activity simple, and explain that the class is testing what synchronised action does to group attention (while leaving open the option for students to participate quietly, or simply observe).

Afterwards, compare how the group starts its work with a lesson in which they *don’t* have the warm-up. Rhythm and co-ordinated action engage forms of communication that aren’t reliant on words. Used carefully, they can help a class develop a felt sense of timing, connection and readiness to work together.

4. Every few days, alter *one* detail in the classroom. You could move a poster, swap two objects, change the lighting or remove a chair. Students who manage to spot the difference write it down on a piece of paper, which they then place in a box. If it suits the group, you can keep a light-hearted leaderboard. Try linking the game to subject-specific observations, such as a tiny inconsistency in a graph or a changed word in a quotation. The process is playful but the learning is serious, as students sharpen their visual attention while the classroom itself becomes part of the enquiry.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Poel is a Berlin-based embodiment practitioner, educator and consultant; Guy Claxton is Emeritus Professor of the Learning Sciences at the University of Winchester; their co-authored book, *Bodies of Learning: How Embodiment Science Transforms Education*, is available now (£16.99, Routledge)

Just for the clicks

Aaron Swan rails against the scourge of teacher targeted, AI-generated, engagement-farming online ‘ragebait’...

If you follow any teachers’ groups on Facebook, it’s almost inevitable that at some point you’ll be algorithmically targeted by engagement farming – groups or profiles set up specifically to generate as large an audience as possible, using some of the basest social-media click-generation techniques, popularly known as ‘ragebait’.

No matter who you are, or what socioeconomic group, subculture or political persuasion you fall into, there will be groups out there who are attempting to capture your engagement, with all of us at risk of being exposed to overlapping and compounding harms.

A framing imbalance

I, for instance, have been targeted by ‘manosphere’ groups promoting the idea that feminism is a toxic belief system that denies men their rightful empowerment, authority, and sexual rights. I’ve also had right-wing political groups appear in my feed that define ‘social engineering’ in terms of racialism and nationalism. And as a teacher, I’ve been approached by groups determined to frame problems in classroom culture as deficiencies in students, parents, and senior leadership teams.

What these groups all have in common is that I, as their target audience, am framed by them as being the ‘victim’ of a form of cultural decay with an easily identifiable and often fairly singular cause. They also work to ‘other’ identities operating within the same spaces, in an

effort to restore power and status to those who have ‘unfairly’ lost it.

The harm of these posts lies in the imbalance of their framing. They never seem to concern themselves with how our own roles might have contributed to the cultures we find ourselves in. There’s little acknowledgement of how, for example, *men* may have played a part in shaping the identities of their partners. Or of how left-leaning voters can sometimes self-identify as ‘The Educated’, thus disqualifying the lived

Consider the following example posts:

“Dear teachers – six hours of teaching can’t fix 18 years of bad parenting. Accept it or let it go.”

– Facebook post, 5th June 2026

“When teachers speak up about the lack of respect, that’s not complaining; it’s a warning sign. When teachers question how long they can stay, the problem isn’t them. It’s the system.”

– Facebook post (same account), 6th June 2026

“To scrutinise the posts of engagement farms is to dispel their power”

experience of other voters who might simply lack the good fortune of having received a similar level of education themselves.

Teachers have meanwhile fought to maintain a level of authority in the classroom that’s increasingly at odds with wider societal aims focused on dismantling hierarchies and granting greater autonomy and empowerment to young people. No actor in a culture is fundamentally removed from its narrative.

Deconstruct the messaging

To scrutinise the posts of engagement farms is to dispel their power. Deconstructing their messaging, so that the internal inconsistencies and biases come to light, can help to disrupt their influence.

The fundamental problem with engagement farming is that it’s not motivated by trying to find solutions – only the generation of ‘clicks’. In the above examples, we see how the very real issue of classroom disobedience is characterised as solely a consequence of parenting. The subsequent engagement they attract becomes little more than a chorus of voices pointing to all the ways in which parents are failing teachers by failing their children (*‘I can’t do my job because X child is unteachable...’* etc.).

The discourse surrounding our profession doesn’t have to be like this. We could, say, look to a May 2026 article by Peter Hyman and Shuab Gamote published by *The New World*, titled ‘More snakes than ladders: the life

of a young NEET’ (see tinyurl.com/ts156-RB1): *“At the end of our journey, we were struck by two things. How resilient and surprisingly optimistic these young people were, despite all the pressures. And second, how much needs to change in a system that just isn’t working – school, transitions, mental health, work – so that there are more ladders and fewer snakes.”*

In contrast to the engagement farming found on social media, parents here aren’t being cited as a source of degradation.

Held to different standards

The repeated framing of teachers as victims and parents as ‘the problem’ on social media incites a mixture of responses. Some will correctly point out the overlapping harms that young people face, but a significant number will merely comment in agreement and put forward a series of familiar talking points, such as *‘Teachers are expected to compensate for issues rooted in home life,’* and *‘Behavioural norms at home often conflict with expectations in school,’* or *‘Teachers feel overburdened by responsibilities that extend far beyond teaching.’*

These emotionally-charged responses are hardly ever aligned with carefully researched and authoritative analysis, of course. They’re just concrete evidence that social media has become a de facto echo chamber, in which anonymous group posts soak up a kind of ‘publication status’ that validates the posters’ subjective

experiences and vice versa.

Those publications that genuinely attempt to identify how teachers and schools should evolve are largely found in paid-for media, where authors will be named and editors can expect to face accountability. Print media more broadly has to uphold certain editorial standards, none of which apply to the engagement economy of social media. Corrections can be legally enforced, redactions must be made public, and easily checked errors are considered

revolution. The other is the infamous AI-generated video, which is typically short-form in nature (under 30 seconds), but will likely become longer in future.

Needless to say, the generation of both essays and videos in large quantities has become ever more accessible as AI technology has entered the mainstream.

For essays and videos alike, a few lines of prompt can be all that's needed to produce a highly persuasive media text that works to reinforce existing echo chambers, while directing engagement away from properly researched and more responsibly written articles.

When
contacting

the debate being balanced soon gets lost, and that publicly calling out bad actors becomes prohibited.

My fear is that attempts at expressing how harms can and do overlap get lost amid social media's flurry of subjective finger-pointing. In fact, it's worse than that. If right-wing and manosphere content warrants criticism for radicalising its audience against innocent subgroups (and it does), could ragebait engagement farming targeted at teaching forums claim the same? Are we at risk of turning against the very people we've signed up to serve and support?

Fighting back

So what are our safeguards? Services like GPTZero (gptzero.me) can be used to flag AI-generated content. The credit lines used by certain groups provide at least some form of accountability. We social media users could also make a point of asking how the provocative content we see being posted aligns with published research.

Unfortunately for us, social media platforms don't routinely flag user-posted AI-generated content, deliberate engagement farming or straight-up ragebait. That's because for now, at least, the existence of such posts is as beneficial to the platform as they are to those posting them.

The safest thing you can do is to purchase your media content, and reward those media outlets trying to profit from spreading objectivity and insight, rather than anger and resentment. We need to start paying into the truth economy.

to be a cause for social embarrassment. You can't say the same about what people post on X and Facebook.

Subjective finger-pointing

As well as the previously cited 'short prompt' posts that read like classic text

messages, there are two other forms of posting we should be concerned by. One is the AI-generated 'essay' – long-form posts that often tell the story of some harm that's been perpetrated before calling for some form of

certain groups to ask about the efficacy of their AI-generated content, or challenge the bias of a post in their comments section, one may very well end up getting blocked. What's concerning about this is that any sense of



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ASK THE EXPERT

“It’s about accessibility, not perfection”

Discover how adaptive teaching and assistive technology can help every pupil access learning with confidence...

How can ECTs manage behaviour while meeting all learners’ needs?

A common concern for ECTs is managing behaviour when pupils become disengaged. Often, the underlying issue isn’t behaviour, but a lack of access to learning. When pupils struggle to read instructions, understand vocabulary or complete tasks independently, frustration can quickly follow. A proactive approach is to understand the adaptive teaching strategies and assistive technologies available within your school. By removing barriers to learning early, you can improve engagement, build confidence and create a calmer, more productive classroom environment for everyone.

How can we support all learners without adding to workloads?

Many ECTs strive for perfection, but effective teaching is about accessibility, not perfection. Instead of creating multiple lessons, focus on adaptive teaching approaches that will ensure all pupils can access learning. Assistive technology can help reduce planning pressures while increasing inclusion. Reading support tools, for example, will enable pupils to access text independently, giving teachers more capacity to focus on learning outcomes.

Where should I start when thinking about equitable access?

Before introducing new strategies, build a clear picture of the support already in place and whether it’s working. Could your pupils access learning more independently? What barriers are preventing their progress? Consider how existing assistive tools, such as scanning pens, can strengthen your current interventions. Knowing how that support is being implemented will lead to better access, engagement and outcomes.



EXPERT PROFILE

NAME:

Julia Clouter

JOB TITLE:

Director of Education, Policy and Strategy, Empowering Tech

AREA OF EXPERTISE:

Inclusion, SEND, assistive technology and neurodiversity

BEST PART OF MY JOB:

Helping to turn inclusion from a policy into a lived reality

What strategies will create a more accessible classroom?

The most effective strategies will complement existing interventions and increase access for everyone. At Scanning Pens, we provide reading aids that are proven to increase reading age by more than 10 months in just eight weeks, alongside implementation guidance, training and review tools. This support helps schools evaluate impact, strengthen adaptive teaching practice and ensure pupils receive the right support at the right time.

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The right assistive technology can reduce frustration, increase independence and prevent challenging behaviour. By enabling pupils to access age-appropriate and interest-based content, teachers can nurture their confidence and enjoyment while fostering positive attitudes towards reading. Over time, this will lead to improved attainment and better outcomes, while helping teachers create classrooms where every child feels capable, included and able to succeed.

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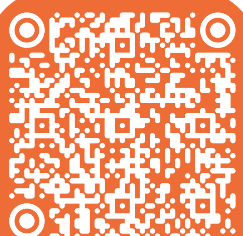
The Secondary Reading and Fluency Intervention Programme is a structured, engaging resource for teachers, teaching assistants (TAs), learning support assistants (LSAs), reading mentors, or older pupils working with struggling and reluctant readers in secondary school.

This pick-up-and-go resource makes reading accessible, purposeful, and enjoyable for students who are reading below their chronological age.

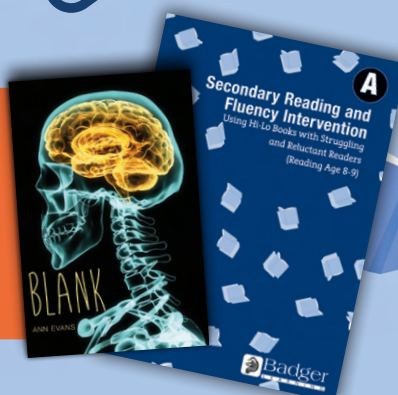
“Overall, this feels like a really strong fluency intervention offer. Schools are crying out for clear, structured secondary fluency interventions, and this resource feels practical, accessible, and genuinely usable. The combination of engaging Hi-Lo texts with consistent, well-scaffolded teaching materials makes this a valuable resource for schools supporting struggling and reluctant readers.

The books themselves read like genuine young adult fiction rather than simplified texts. I really enjoyed them and won't hesitate to recommend them.”

**Rachel Ayres, Literacy Specialist,
Wensum English Hub**



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FOCUS ON: ENGLISH

Strategies for bypassing the friction and making students more receptive to reading, thinking about stories and engaging with biggest literary great of all...

Should we be teaching and assessing English differently?

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Let their IDEAS SOAR

Meera Chudasama explores the approaches English teachers can pursue when helping students sharpen up their essay writing skills...

Getting students in a *creative* space for writing can feel challenging, yet doable. From sentence starters to immersive images, students can draw on their own imaginations and pools of existing stories to inspire their next narrative or description – but what about writing an essay?

Writing essays is its own skill; writing academic essays is its own art form. Once students are able to grasp a simple structure, they will find themselves with the freedom to express their own views in subtle, more nuanced ways.

In the age of instant messaging and quick comments, of course, many students find writing an essay a tiresome task – ‘*Why can’t I use the word ‘I’?*’ ‘*What’s the introduction for?*’ ‘*Isn’t the introduction just like the conclusion?*’ – these are all important questions that serve as stepping stones for students’ discovery of their own writing style. Here, I’m going to detail some of the ways in which my English Department colleagues and I have tried to break down the arduous process of writing an essay.

1. Read and Tweak

Give students a poorly written essay, along with improvement criteria that includes a range of feedback points you want them to look out for. Direct students’ attention to those areas that can be improved upon by verbally highlighting issues within the text.

To adapt the task for different classes, you could use differently coloured pens

for different bits of feedback – such as blue for ‘positives’ and green for ‘areas to improve’, or blue for ‘understanding of the text’, green for ‘use of subject terminology’ and purple for ‘contextual links’. You could also employ a key of four or five different symbols to make the task quicker, with each symbol linked to a specific part of the mark scheme.

A potential extension task could see students reading good quality essays written by their peers, to show them how such writing is achievable. By doing this regularly throughout the academic year you can embed the practice of having students refine their essay-focused skills.

2. The Film Trailer

More often than not, students can find it difficult to plan and start their introduction, especially at KS3. I’ll often compare the relationship between an introduction and the main body of an essay to that of a trailer and its parent feature film. Get students considering the following:

- What will be the highlight of your essay?
- Which key quotations do you want to show to the reader?
- How will you show the reader your understanding of key characters in the

story we have studied?

- What is your argument in this essay and how will you present that argument?

You could take this analogy further by getting students to storyboard their essay, with each frame conveying a key idea or quotation they want to use to anchor their argument. This could be an especially effective approach for more visual learners.

3. Pass the Paragraph

If you want to help students improve the structure of their paragraphs, but are struggling with a reluctance on their part to read their own work, then ‘Pass the paragraph’ can be a great activity for directing students’ focus to close reading of sentences, and

encouraging them to carefully consider how they could develop their own essays further.

Give each student a lined piece of paper, then present the class with an essay question that they need to write down. Explain that they’ll be constructing paragraphs in collaboration with their peers and following a familiar writing structure – in my case, PEEZL (point, evidence,

“Writing essays is its own skill; writing academic essays is its own art form”

explain, zoom in, link).

In round 1, have the students write a clear point that addresses the essay question and demonstrates their understanding of the topic/story. The students then pass their written points to the person on their right (or left, if preferred – but keep the direction consistent after each round).

In round 2, students read the point they've been passed, and must then source quotations from the story/text that will support that point. Students write down

the embedded quotation they've chosen before passing their work on to the next person.

By round 3, the students will be getting passed a point and some supporting evidence. Now they need to write down a clear explanation of *how* the quotation chosen by the person before them can be explained and linked back to the essay question.

The passing around of work in this way is a process that makes students accountable to each other, and which can make students more conscious of their writing, given that their peers will be reading what they've written. I've found this activity to be particularly effective with Y8.

4. Discourse markers

Giving students a range of 'discourse markers' can encourage them to experiment with different ways of connecting, organising and developing their ideas.

There are plenty of ready-made lists that you can print out for students to refer to. Stick these inside the front or back covers of their exercise books and let students check them as and when they need to.

5. Zooming In

Getting students to develop depth in their analyses when writing academic essays can be tricky. You want them to not only showcase their understanding of texts, but hopefully go above and beyond by showing some flair when articulating their ideas. Ways of encouraging deeper thinking can include:

- **Essay grids** – An essay grid can be used to separate out each element you need students to address within their essays
- **Hexagonal grids** – I'll often use hexagonal grids/ beehive-like structures when focusing students' attention on language

analysis. Students can place an extracted quotation in the middle of the beehive, then add relevant assessment objectives (or other criteria set by your department) to each of the surrounding hexagons.

• Explode the quotation

– This can be useful preparatory work for an essay. You may want to approach it as a scaffolded activity, wherein you support students in developing their own ideas around a set of quotations that you want them to feature in an essay.

6. Editing and proofreading

Editing and proofreading is a key step in the essay writing process to which we'll often assign the smallest amount of time. To underscore its importance, provide students with an editing and proofreading checklist, or maybe even a 'Nando's'-style menu with increasing intensities of 'flavour' according to the difficulty of skills that they'll need to show in their essay.

There are a range of ways in which we can make crafting an essay easier, more engaging and less arduous. The writing of an essay can be an exploratory and experimental process, in which students are given space to craft their own paragraphs, explore their preferred writing style and eventually become curators of their own writing – the latter being a skill that will do much to help them become successful writers.



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

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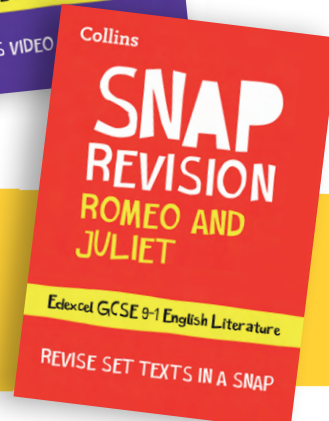
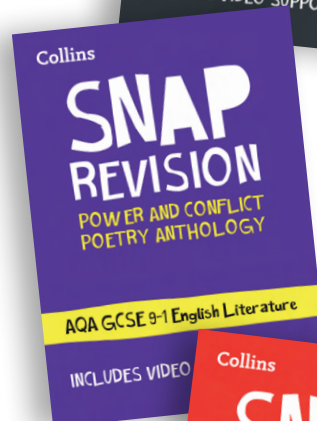
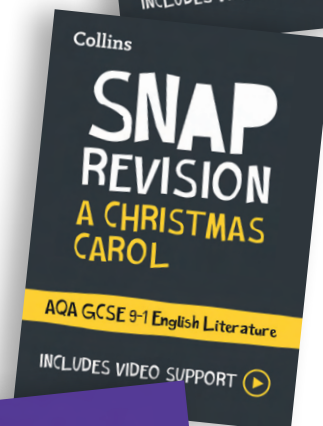
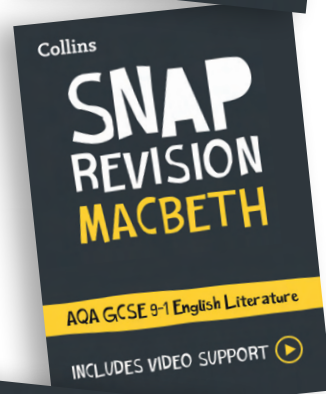
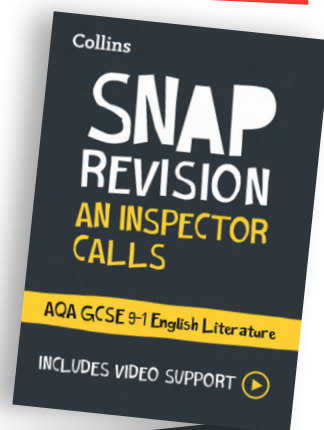
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Burden of proof

If we want more pupils to read, we should make reading more appealing – not set a formal Y8 literacy test, writes **Karen Hart**

When it was confirmed last year by the now former Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, that all 13-year-olds will sit a mandatory reading test as of the 2028/29 academic year, the news was met with a mixed response.

The government has stated that the policy is a necessary response to concerns around how inadequate reading skills not only stifle outcomes in English, but also prevent students from fully accessing the curriculum as a whole.

Nationally, around a quarter of Y6s don't currently meet the expected standard in reading. This has caused some alarm at the DfE, given how certain pupils, particularly in disadvantaged groups, have been found to disengage during their first year at secondary, never fully catch up on their reading and go on to fail their GCSE English exams. Indeed, nearly 30% of GCSE entrants fell below a grade 4 in English in 2025 – hence the belief that Y8 testing will allow time for support to be put in place before the start of KS4.

A different path

But is this new kind of test really the best way to determine which pupils require targeted help? Could the same assessment aims be perhaps better achieved via a different path?

The policy has certainly landed poorly among the major teaching unions. Speaking at the NEU's Annual

Conference in Brighton earlier this year, NEU general secretary Daniel Kebede said, *"The NEU welcomes the government's commitment to tackling the decline in reading for pleasure among young people, but introducing a mandatory Year 8 reading test undermines the very aim it seeks to achieve."*

"Pigs don't get fatter the more you weigh them – and children don't learn to love reading by being tested repeatedly."

"A new mandatory test at Y8 will mean more time

spent preparing children for a test, diverting valuable time and resources away from teaching a broad, balanced and content-rich curriculum that nurtures a genuine love of reading."

Full differentiation

Phillipson, however, remained resolute through all the criticisms, saying she would 'take the unions on' over the proposal.

A big point of contention here is the relevance of setting a dedicated Y8 literacy test. What new information will it provide that we don't currently have? Given the fair amount of pupil assessment data that's already available to teachers, any new test will only be worthwhile if it can be used to fully differentiate between the multiple levels of reading ability within a Y8 cohort, and identify specific areas that need working on.

That means *everyone* – from the wholly capable, efficient reader, through to those pupils still struggling with the basics. We know that the variation in ability at Y8 can be huge, yet details on how the tests will help to deliver fully diagnostic, focused interventions have yet to be disclosed.

Teachers have also expressed some concern that these new tests will ultimately take up valuable time that could be better spent on other activities that enrich learning

and instil a joy in education. An additional test will inevitably be a cause for increased anxiety among children who are falling behind, and who *know* they're falling behind.

Moments of joy

The government is yet to publish a financial forecast for the roll-out of the tests, since they're still in the development stage, but we can reasonably assume that implementing them will take a sizeable chunk of money away from what's an already cash-strapped area of funding.

Would that money not simply be better spent on teacher-led reading time? Or more books? School libraries are often understocked with new titles. We know that tests never instil a love of reading, while a diverse selection of engaging books frequently will. We could also look at organising extracurricular activities – giving pupils enjoyable experiences that can be read about together in class, and bringing context to their reading sessions.

More than anything, we should ask ourselves how many of today's pupils will look back on these tests as being helpful, rather than a burden that produced no meaningful legacy...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Hart is a teacher, author, and freelance writer



WHEN READING *becomes fragile*

Adam Lancaster explains why teachers' efforts to improve reading standards can sometimes fail to account for the bigger picture

Schools have become much sharper at teaching reading. Across the sector, there's now far more understanding of phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension compared to even just a decade ago. Literacy is being scrutinised more closely, with many schools thinking carefully about how reading should be taught, supported and monitored.

And yet, despite all this, there remain some students who can read, but who don't become *readers*. They can decode, access texts and even answer comprehension questions reasonably well, but something important fails to take hold.

What schools miss

At this point, schools will start to consider what they can do. Organise another intervention? Establish more reading routines? Exercise more accountability? Offer more encouragement or more challenge? Mount an even stronger push on reading for pleasure?

These steps can sometimes help, but often the issue isn't that reading hasn't been taught well enough – it's that a student's reading has already become fragile, before the teaching has had a chance to fully land. And it's this fragility that schools can often miss.

Reading disengagement rarely arrives all at once. Students don't wake up one morning and decide to 'stop being readers'. What usually happens is that their reading becomes less secure over

time. It becomes effortful, exposing and predictable in all the wrong ways, and gradually stops being meaningful to them.

Addressing the mechanics

Schools will tend to default to addressing the *mechanics* of reading, because these are what can be most easily taught, observed and improved. If a student struggles with their reading, our natural response will be to think about decoding, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. But while these are essential, there's an

sports analysis, lyrics, game guides – yet not consider themselves a 'reader', because none of those activities feel like 'legitimate' reading based on the values that they've internalised at school.

These aren't mechanical problems, and won't all respond well to the same solution. Some reading strategies can work brilliantly for one class, while quietly failing for another. The strategy itself may not even be the issue – but the surrounding conditions could be.

where a more *ecological view* of reading can be useful. This approach tasks schools with looking not just at what the students themselves are doing, but at the environmental factors that surround their broader reading experience.

Examine this more closely, and you can start to see some common patterns.

“Some reading strategies can work brilliantly for one class, while quietly failing for another”

additional layer that schools often don't attend to nearly enough – namely *the conditions around reading*.

A child may have enough skill to read, but lack the sense of safety needed to do so comfortably in front of others. Another may possess sufficient comprehension skills to make sense of a text, but won't attach enough value to reading to choose it over other activities.

Yet another may be capable of reading a book, but feel too fatigued to sustain their interest after a busy school day. Someone else may read constantly outside school – online articles, fandom posts, subtitled videos,

What schools see

When reading becomes fragile, schools will respond to what they can see. They'll start to notice that some students aren't reading enough, so they'll increase the amount of reading time. They'll observe that students' reading has become quite passive, so they'll add response tasks and follow-up questions.

These are understandable moves, but can increase the cognitive cost of reading if the students' surrounding ecology is unstable – which is



Some students aren't disengaged because they hate reading, but because reading is *exhausting*. They start with good intentions, which then simply fade because sustained reading takes more effort than the adults around them realise.

Some students won't be disengaged because they lack ability, but because reading has become exposing. They don't trust themselves as readers, with this fear of 'getting it wrong' constantly looming over every reading task they're set.

Some are disengaged not because they reject stories or knowledge, but because *reading no longer feels like an option worth choosing*. It's just one more task that demands effort, without seeming to give much back.

Then there are those students who actually read voraciously, but via screens – visually, interactively, and multimodally, all the while absorbing the message that none of what they're doing makes them 'real readers'. Other students may be reading in the 'approved' way, but only ever within one

familiar genre, one predictable format or via one tightly controlled routine. Reading survives, but in an extremely narrowed form.

Finally, there will be a few who can read well one day, but not the next, depending entirely on who's watching, where they are and how reading is being framed for them. The issue for this latter group isn't so much inability as instability.

These distinctions all matter, because they demand different responses.

What to do differently

Once schools begin noticing these forms of reading fragility earlier, they can act in more precise ways. That doesn't have to mean doing more – in fact, some of the most helpful shifts may involve doing less.

It might mean reducing the amount of public reading you do, rather than increasing it. It could mean allowing more switching between books, without judgement. It could mean recognising the legitimacy of reading via multiple formats and media, rather than clinging tightly to one model of 'proper reading'.

It could also mean accepting that early reading progress is often made in a quieter way than schools might like. A student who browses books in the library but doesn't yet borrow any is still moving in the right direction. A student who re-reads a favourite title won't have necessarily stalled. Another whose reading leans more towards manga, non-fiction and other visual formats may simply be opting for the route that keeps reading alive for them.

The student who reads for five minutes today, having not read anything at all yesterday, isn't a disappointment.

They're an important reminder that reading *stability* often builds before reading *ambition*.

More than visible activity

There's a lot of national energy around reading at the moment, which is welcome – but the risk of any heightened focus on reading is that schools become adept at producing the outward *appearance* of good reading, while missing the deeper conditions that make reading sustainable.

Displays, 'drop-everything-and-read' moments, library events, reading challenges, tutor time routines, curriculum drives – these all have their place, but none of them, on their own, can tell you whether reading feels viable for the child who has already learned that reading equates to effort, risk or exposure.

If we want a positive reading culture to develop and become securely embedded, it has to transcend such events and become part of our 'ordinary'. It has to live in how we talk about reading, and in what we legitimise and notice; in how safe it is to be a partial, hesitant, emerging or unconventional reader.

It should enable the same child to experience reading as a valid activity in English lessons, at tutor times, during library visits, when at home and in all the spaces in between. That's slower work than mounting a campaign, but it's work that *lasts*.

The question that changes everything

For me, the most useful shift a school can make is to go from asking '*Why won't they read?*' to instead asking, '*What has made reading fragile here?*'

That's a question that opens up professional conversations that are much more useful. It turns the attention towards conditions, rather than character, to matters of design over blame. It

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Below are some questions you should be asking of your reading culture – the answers to which may explain why it's failing to hold certain students within it...

- ▶ What messages are students getting about what 'counts' as reading?
- ▶ How safe is it to not immediately 'get' a text and put it down?
- ▶ How visible is their reading, and how much of it has to be proved afterwards?
- ▶ How often is reading framed in school as something 'virtuous' or 'improving', rather than something that can simply exist?
- ▶ How socially risky is it to be seen around school as a reader?
- ▶ What does the reading environment feel like in practice, not just on paper?

doesn't replace the importance of teaching reading well – it simply recognises that teaching works best when the ecology around reading allows it to.

In many secondary schools that's where the real work still needs to happen, because sometimes the problem isn't that reading skills are absent. It's that reading has already become too hard to hold.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam Lancaster is head of literacy, specialist reading tutor and SSAT lead practitioner for literacy at Monk's Walk School, Hertfordshire

5 REASONS TO USE... Adaptive teaching

Inclusive teaching practice, when consistently implemented, can help all students across the board



30 SECOND BRIEFING

Build inclusive and consistent practice through evidence-based training, practical strategies and lived experience. Help your staff embed effective adaptations into everyday teaching and create environments where all learners can thrive.

1 REMOVE BARRIERS

Secondary classrooms are complex environments. Within a single lesson, teachers can be supporting pupils with a wide range of abilities, needs and levels of independence. Ensuring all students can access learning can feel increasingly challenging, but adaptive teaching provides a practical and sustainable way forward.

At its core, adaptive teaching is about anticipating variation and planning accordingly. It's not about creating multiple versions of lessons, or reducing expectations, but rather focusing on the removal of barriers, so that all students can engage with the same ambitious curriculum.

2 BUILD CONFIDENCE

Given the increased lesson pace and subject complexity in secondary settings, small adjustments can have a significant impact. These could include breaking complex instructions down into clear, structured steps; using visual supports to reinforce explanations and reduce cognitive load; checking for understanding throughout the lesson via targeted questioning; and explicitly modelling processes, particularly during extended tasks or assessments.

These approaches can help students manage increasingly demanding content, while building confidence and independence in their learning across different subjects and lessons.



3 IMPROVE THE ENVIRONMENT

Noise levels, classroom layouts and sensory demands can all affect students' concentration and willingness to participate. Practical adaptations here may include offering designated quiet spaces during lessons; minimising visual distractions; offering flexible seating options (where possible); and using consistent visual timetables or lesson structures to aid predictability and smooth transitions. These adaptations may be particularly beneficial for neurodivergent students, but can also improve focus and engagement among all learners.



Contact:
nen.org.uk
naslearn.org.uk

4 ENSURE CONSISTENCY

In secondary schools, consistency is critical. With students moving between multiple classrooms and teachers each day, a shared approach reduces uncertainty and reinforces expectations. Inclusive practice can be strengthened by setting routines across departments, carefully structuring transitions between lessons, adopting a co-ordinated approach to breaks and unstructured time, and maintaining quieter calm spaces to support sensory regulation.

These whole-school adaptations can reduce students' cognitive and emotional load, support learning and wellbeing, and improve consistency throughout the school day.

5 UPSKILL YOUR STAFF

The Neuroinclusive Education Network (NEN), part of the National Autistic Society, partners with schools, trusts and LAs to support embedded inclusive practice. Through its evidence-informed training, the NEN helps settings create inclusive environments in which all students, including neurodivergent learners, can succeed. Its Inclusive Practice Development Programme (IPDP), for instance, draws on research, practical applications and lived experience to support system-wide workforce development. It enables all staff across different departments to embed inclusive strategies confidently *within their subject teaching*, rather than view them as additional interventions.

Key Points

Plan with different needs in mind and remove barriers, without the need for separate lessons or lowered expectations, so that every pupil can access learning together.

Break instructions down into smaller steps, use visual prompts and model tasks to help build confidence, reduce confusion and support pupils' independence.

Consider the noise, layouts and visual clutter of your classrooms; quiet spaces, flexible seating options and visual timetables will help to create calmer, more productive classrooms.

Embed adaptations across the whole school by sharing routines and practical strategies, while helping staff consistently apply inclusive practice as part of their daily duties.



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A young man and woman are shown in a close embrace, kissing. The woman has long, wavy, reddish-brown hair and is wearing a light-colored jacket. The man has dark hair and is wearing a dark jacket. They are outdoors, with a blurred background of green foliage.

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Introducing THE BARD

Jonathan Brough explores how teachers can provide Y7/8 pupils with enjoyable and motivating introductions to the Shakespearean canon

“He was not of an age, but for all time!”

Ben Jonson’s 1623 tribute to Shakespeare continues to resonate around the globe – but how confident would he have been in that assertion if he could have glimpsed today’s algorithm-driven world of soundbites, snippets and streaming?

At a time when today’s young people frequently struggle to muster sufficient focus and concentration to read novels, how can English teachers ever hope to develop students’ critical appreciation of Shakespearean texts?

Universal themes

As we know, the Bard’s work deals with universal themes and emotions such as love, envy, jealousy, deceit, loyalty and revenge. It’s not at all controversial to assert that it’s just as pertinent to contemporary humanity as it’s always been.

Nevertheless, young people *do* experience certain barriers to enjoying Shakespearean texts, and it’s a fundamental part of our job, as English teachers, to help students overcome them.

These difficulties can be exacerbated if pupils’ initial experience of a Shakespearean play is on the page, rather than on the stage. When experienced in a theatre, the actors’ performances can enable the audience’s collective understanding to develop meaningfully in context. In

the classroom, students’ initial impressions of a Shakespeare play will be shaped first and foremost by the high esteem in which The Bard is held by an establishment made up of teachers, exam boards and the government.

This can have the effect of elevating Shakespeare and his writing far above young people’s cultural sight lines. They know Shakespeare is important, that he represents some elusive ‘gold standard’ of writing, but will view that reputation

like to think that we possess the kind of innate professionalism and passion that can transform dusty ‘Schools Edition’ Shakespeare texts into spellbinding and empowering portals to enlightened appreciation, resulting in enthusiastic and empathetic pupil performances...

...but alas, life’s not like that. The cause of Shakespeare appreciation is frequently stymied by well-intentioned, yet ultimately

recognise the plays’ true worth.

This is why my classroom practice has always been a little different. When starting to explore any Shakespearean text, I won’t even mention the name of the work or acknowledge the playwright. Instead, I tell the class that, ‘*We’re going to improvise a story together,*’ and proceed to talk them through the plot of the relevant play via five or six key scenes, which they’re then tasked with performing in groups, alongside a linking narrative that I provide.

Unbeknownst to them, this ‘production’ that we’re collaboratively developing shares its themes with the Shakespearean work we’re about to explore. I’ll have updated the setting, the protagonists’ names and backstories and, where necessary, the central dilemma, so that they reflect modern sensibilities.

“Speeches that should be dramatic and consequential can seem unthreatening and inauthentic”

cautiously. They’re aware that Shakespeare is among the very best, but also that he’s not *theirs*. At least not yet.

So, how should well-intentioned English teachers go about sharing their love of Shakespeare in such a way that classes of initially hesitant, doubtful students can become the next generation of RSC fanatics?

A different practice

The answer to that question *should* involve little more than some free hall space and a pile of scripts. We teachers

counterproductive supporting resources for students. From study guides that seem to accept the plays’ inherent incomprehensibility as their starting point, to ‘modern English’ scripts that strip away all of Shakespeare’s fantastic poetry in one fell swoop, there’s no shortage of supposedly revolutionary learning aids that simply deepen the fundamental engagement issues we have, rather than actually assist teachers with performing the job of helping students

Name that play

‘*Two households, both alike in dignity*’, for example, become two school houses locked in fierce competition for an end-of-year arts cup. The Y13 house leaders are too aloof and busy with their A Levels to be actively involved in the practices and rehearsals, so they leave matters to Y7 – but then two friends, each from opposing sides, reason that both performances will benefit if they collaborate and share resources, so they start working together in secret.

Despite well-meaning interventions from the school's first-aider and an RE teacher, things go awry. An over-enthusiastic ally gets banned from the contest and storms out, professing their hopes for neither house to win. One of the two friends then gets suspended by the headteacher, but returns in disguise, wearing the uniform of another school (supplied by the kindly RE teacher) to pass himself off as a recently-transferred newbie – only for disaster to ensue through a tragic case of mistaken identity. You get the picture.

As the class's improvisations become more polished, I start to supply a few key (hopefully unrecognised) quotations lifted verbatim from the Shakespearean text, and ask the pupils to incorporate these into their pieces. When chosen judiciously, they shouldn't appear too alien or jarring. Instead, they fit naturally into the evolving script. With the actors' permission, I then record our final efforts for us all to watch later. It's certainly not the original play, but it is a useful bridge they can cross naturally before entering the world of the source text.

Only once we've finished our improvised story will I hand out the Shakespearean scripts – whereupon I'll direct the class's attention to those scenes that served as inspiration for our class-developed improvisations. With the play's dialogue already familiar to them, the performers' confidence starts to grow and soon the penny drops – they've been performing Shakespeare all this time, without even realising it!

Breaking down the barrier

When approached cold, the distance created by Shakespearean language can make speeches that should be dramatic and consequential

seem unthreatening and inauthentic. Except now, you have video evidence of what those speeches are actually conveying, which the students have performed themselves. With relatively little stress, the language barrier has crumbled, in a way that leaves pupils with an appetite for exploring the remainder of the work.

This approach is one I recently revisited when writing my latest YA novel, *Cottingley Beck*. First and foremost, it's a fast-paced, accessible LGBT romance concerned with themes of honesty, integrity, prejudice and deceit in a light-hearted, enjoyable narrative. It's not a guide, crammer, parallel text or indeed potted version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

However, it so happens that the central characters are rehearsing a school production of that very play when they discover some pots of moisturiser that exhibit a powerful psychological effect when the wearer wakes after falling asleep. It later emerges that said unguents were produced in the smoothie maker of a certain Ms Goody Puckle – environmental activist PA to the school principal, (Obe) Ron – who appears to have drawn on an encyclopaedic knowledge of homeopathy to identify some particularly active ingredients...

Story parallels

I'd hope that some teachers will find *Cottingley Beck* useful for helping their class launch into a study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Some chapters are especially relevant to certain scenes of the play, to the point where they could be used as

extracts to facilitate the class performance process outlined above.

But more than that, I hope readers of the novel will take steps to discover the original for themselves, or else stumble upon it in future and find themselves intrigued by the story parallels, thus marshalling some of that intertextual 'finding the Easter eggs' energy that many young learners will have built up through their enjoyment of various films and video games. (There's a grid of around 50 references available for free download from booksbyjonathan.website.)

Cottingley Beck stands apart from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It's an entirely different story concerning 21st century characters who are struggling to make sense of themselves,

their identities and the conflicting objectives of those around them, yet the clear links between both texts show that Jonson was right, after all. Such concepts are not of 'any single age', but truly are 'for all time' because they lie at the heart of the human condition.

That, in a nutshell, is the source of Shakespeare's genius. Ensuring that those in our charge continue to appreciate it is fundamental to our duty as educators.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Brough coordinated English in four schools before undertaking three headships; recently retired from full-time teaching, he now works as an educational consultant and YA author. *Cottingley Beck* is due for publication in September 2026 (£9.99, Crear Publishing); follow him at [@jbroughauthor](https://www.instagram.com/jbroughauthor) (Insta)

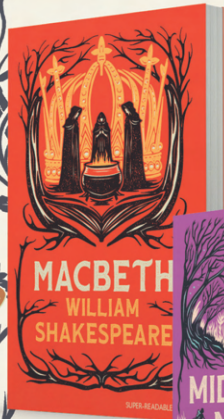


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LYSANDER
How now, my love! Why is your cheek so pale?
How chance the roses there do fade so fast?

HERMIA
Belike for want of rain, which I could well
Beteem them from the tempest of my eyes.

LYSANDER
Ay me! For aught that I could ever read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth;
But either it was different in blood—

HERMIA
O cross! Too high to be enthralled to low.

LYSANDER
Or else misgraffed in respect of years—

HERMIA
O spite! Too old to be engaged to young.

LYSANDER
Or else it stood upon the choice of friends—

ACT 1 SCENE 1 19

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IN THIS ISSUE

- + Is your school ready for the introduction of Martyn's Law?
- + The crucial role of eye contact in behaviour management
- + What we can learn from art inspired by insects
- + How secure is the data being held by your edtech provider?
- + One history teacher's award-winning practice
- + The advice to give students preparing for resits

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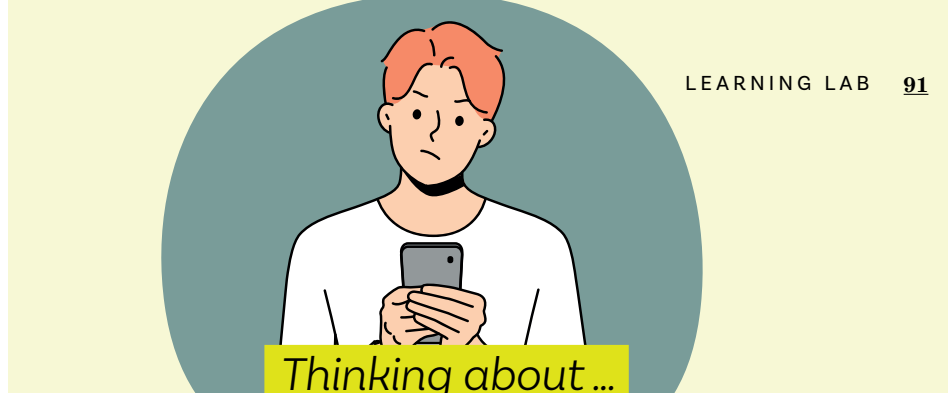
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Smith

Founders, Smith and Stoker tutoring service



CRITICAL THINKING

Equipping young people with the skills to navigate misinformation has become a classroom priority – but how can we teach those skills? They may understand the basic concepts of misinformation, but struggle to connect them with their own experiences.

Relatable, age-appropriate characters in speculative YA fiction can change this dynamic, enabling students to explore complex questions about truth, perception and identity in ways that feel both engaging and relevant.

INSIDE THE PROBLEM

When students see characters they care about navigating uncertainty, conflicting narratives or alternative realities, they can feel as if they're being placed inside the problem, rather than just observing it from the outside.

The most important thing we can ask of our students is that they question how truth is constructed. That may seem like a rather heavy, philosophical task but it needn't be a complicated or abstract exercise. The purpose isn't to locate an absolute answer to what is true, but rather ask students to challenge *how they know* what is true.

A simple, yet effective lesson might involve presenting students with two contrasting interpretations of a key event in a novel, then asking them to identify the differences between both perspectives. This can be particularly powerful with narratives that explore different versions of reality only encountered by certain characters. What information has been included or omitted from each side? Which version do they find more credible and why? What evidence does each side offer to support their view?

FRAMING AND TRUST

We can then extend this into a discussion of how similar processes operate online. What role does framing

play in influencing opinion? How do we decide which sources to trust? If I don't have direct experience of something, how can I determine whether an account of it is true?

By moving between fictional and real-world examples, students can begin to see the direct relevance of these skills. The following prompts can be useful for encouraging discussion and analysis across a range of texts, especially those where different opinions or individuals' views of reality are in conflict.

- How does our protagonist decide what's real or true?
- Are there any moments when their understanding changes?
- What role do other characters play in shaping their beliefs?

The use of fiction may seem to limit this approach to the English classroom, but its application can actually be much broader, reaching into PSHE, media studies and drama. Concepts such as narrative voice, unreliable narrators, identity, perception, misinformation and digital literacy can form a foundation for this type of work, creating a coherent, curriculum-wide approach to critical thinking, online safety and media literacy.

As a final task, students could create a short piece of work that deliberately presents a biased or unreliable version of events. It could take the form of a news report, social media post, fictional narrative or even a performance. The students can then analyse each other's work, identifying where misinformation or bias has been introduced and the possible consequences of that.

Enabling students to stop and think critically about what they see, read or hear has become a vital element of education. All students should have the confidence and skills to stop and ask themselves, '*How do I know if what I'm seeing is true...?*'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harry Allen is an international educator and YA author, with over 20 years' leadership experience in international education across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and was previously an examiner for the International Baccalaureate Organisation's critical thinking course, Theory of Knowledge

FOCUS ON... MARTYN'S LAW

Martyn's Law – formally known as the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 – was passed in April last year. For those unaware, it extends responsibility for counter-terrorism preparedness to a wide range of public places, including all education settings where 200 or more people are expected to be on site at any one time.

In practice, a typical secondary school will comfortably exceed that threshold, since the number doesn't just include pupils, but also staff, contractors and visitors. Recent research has found that while some schools have begun tests of their tech and staff to work out what their lockdown readiness should look like in practice, many others haven't.

HOW TO PREPARE

A survey of educational workers conducted by Little Green Button – 30% of whom worked at secondary schools – found that 44% of school workers hadn't heard of the legislation, with a further 31% unsure if their schools had any plans for it.

With enforcement of the new law expected to commence in early to mid-2027, schools have only months to prepare – though acting now is about more than just avoiding a last-minute panic. Proactive schools are giving themselves the time to strengthen important safety measures, meet new responsibilities confidently and reduce levels of risk for students, staff and parents, should an incident occur before the law comes into force.

With all that in mind, our advice for secondary schools would be to use the remaining implementation



period as effectively as possible and consider performing the following tasks:

- Identify the specific risks your school faces, such as intruders on site, aggressive individuals or incidents in the local area, and consider how these risks may change at different times of day. You could refer to a plan of the site, or walk the perimeter and internal spaces with a critical eye, identifying any weak points and means by which an attacker might gain access.
- Create a solid lockdown plan, accounting for time, control, designated roles, communication protocols and predetermined safe zones. Your procedure should be simple enough to follow under stress, yet flexible enough to work during different times of the school day.
- Run practice drills at least annually, especially after any significant changes to your policy or procedures. Remember to also train any new staff in your lockdown procedures as part of their induction.

- Review the technology systems and security tools your school already has in place, and check to see if they'll provide clear guidance during different emergencies. Many schools still use fire alarms as a catch-all alert, for example, but using the same system for different situations can cause uncertainty. A dedicated lockdown alarm, or clearly differentiated emergency alerts will give staff and students a clearer understanding of how to respond. They can also be used for other safeguarding purposes, such as medical emergencies and behavioural incidents.

The time to take action is now. For more advice on how to comply with the relevant legal duties, we would recommend reading the government's new statutory guidance on the Act (see tinyurl.com/ts156-LL1), which will also determine whether your school falls within its scope.

DO THIS

EYE CONTACT

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

Insist that all of your students look at you whenever you address the class. Keep a set phrase or two on standby that you can use to prompt their attention, such as 'Eyes on me' or 'Track me'. At the same time, be sure to scan the students to increase their compliance.

We're innately compelled to look at people when they're speaking to us, to the point that it feels rude not to (that being the case for most people, at least), so let your gaze settle on a few random and not-so-random students.

Getting and maintaining eye contact from students has three benefits. First, they will pick up on your non-verbal communication, which will in turn help them to improve their clarity and comprehension. Second, you will come across as a teacher who is confident, which will profoundly affect your ability to enhance your presence.

Finally, maintaining eye contact with your students will mean that they're less likely to become distracted, or start causing distractions of their own – both of which will go a long way towards ensuring that the class keeps its focus on you.

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)

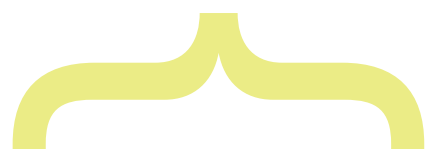


ALEX JAY IS CEO OF THE EMERGENCY ALARM SOFTWARE PROVIDER, LITTLE GREEN BUTTON

70%

of children say that reading books helps them understand why people behave the way they do

Source: Survey of 3,000 UK schoolchildren by Oxford University Press



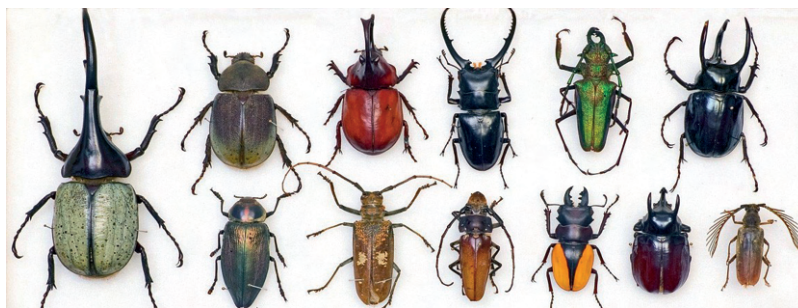
If you're seeing AI being used at your school without any formal training or instruction to speak of, then you're not alone. According to a survey of around 200 school leaders carried out by the tech consultancy Accenture and Teach First, 12% had an official AI policy in place, and only 2% reported having a fully developed AI strategy.

The full survey findings appear in a new report jointly published by both organisations, 'AI in Schools in England', which paints a picture of AI adoption in schools being distinctly piecemeal – enthusiastically embraced by individual teachers, departments and senior leaders, but with relatively little in the way of institutional co-ordination and support.

Among the leaders surveyed, just 16% reported using it daily. 44% used it at least once a week, while 14% didn't use it at all. The report also highlights a growing regional divide, with 29% of school leaders in London using the technology daily, compared to 12% in the rest of England.

According to Teach First CEO James Toop, "Too many teachers and school leaders are being left to navigate these changes without the guidance or support they need. Ensuring every young person, regardless of background or where they live, can safely benefit from the opportunities AI presents must be a priority for the education system."

The full report can be downloaded via tinyurl.com/ts156-LL4



THE ART FILES... INSECT LIFE LESSONS

Hannah Day explores the connections and contrasts between artworks sharing similar themes – one older and one contemporary...

- Natural History Museum entomology collections
- Mat Collishaw, 'Insecticide' (2006)

Virtually every museum and stately home will have housed at least one collection of some kind. The heyday of such collections – which were typically composed of artworks, natural exhibits, rare artefacts and other assorted treasures – was the Victorian era, for multiple reasons.

Some collections were created to express their owners' wealth or education. Others stemmed from a genuine desire to preserve fragments of the past in a rapidly changing world, a determination to provide people with a moral education, or just the simple urge to own. The end result? Over 2,500 public collections – such as the Natural History Museum's Entomology Collection (above) – and countless more under private ownership.

Curating a collection of exquisite butterflies was once a popular pursuit – a process that would see butterflies caught, killed, categorised and meticulously displayed, in order to 'preserve' them. In Mat Collishaw's 'Insecticide' (below), that moment of death is captured via a series of huge, high-definition photographs. When rendered in images almost 2m in size, these tiny creatures become monumental, strange beasts. These specimens, seen as beautiful by Victorians, appear in Collishaw's work as macabre to

modern eyes.

Yet while this Victorian 'killing for preservation' understandably seems like a contradiction to us today, we live at a time when modern homes are routinely cleaned, fumigated and disinfected with the express purpose of ridding them of insects. Indeed, the subjects of 'Insecticide' are insects removed from Collishaw's own flat, ahead of his newborn son's arrival at the family home. By photographing and scanning their remains, Collishaw himself becomes a collector of sorts, while simultaneously highlighting the strange beauty of these tiny organisms.

What unexpected elements of beauty can be found where you are? There may well be some among the everyday items most of us thoughtlessly dispose of (see Irving Penn's 'Cigarette Butt' photographs, or Lisa Congdon's extensive collection of pencil erasers).

What do we preserve? What do we value? How do we order, categorise and display, and in so doing, elevate? Easily collectable everyday items – think milk bottle tops, receipts, bits of packaging – can lead to striking pieces of work when presented as collections. Just make sure you give students several weeks' prep and collection time before the work starts...



HANNAH DAY IS A TEACHER OF ART, MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES

29%

of teaching and school support staff finish the working day feeling mentally exhausted

Source: Study of 4,000 public and private sector employees conducted by Commercial Services Group

Need to know

Schools that make regular use of a MIS, learning platform or behaviour reporting system – i.e. the vast majority – may be interested in, and possibly somewhat concerned about a new report from the Information Commissioner's Office titled 'Edtech Examined'.

The report compiles a series of data protection audits carried out by the ICO among 28 edtech providers between 2024 and 2025. The audits examined a range of products and services spanning everything from administrative and safeguarding tools to classroom apps and data integration services, gauging their effectiveness at securing the personal information of children collected in the course of their operation, and subsequently identified a series of issues.

Chief among them was uncertainty among providers as to whether they were processors of said information (using the data solely in accordance with schools' instructions) or controllers (utilising the data for additional purposes, such as product development).

Other concerns included important details lacking from contracts with schools, inconsistent recording of the data flowing in and out of edtech products and services, outdated/inaccessible privacy information and gaps in providers' data protection impact assessments. The audits ultimately resulted in the ICO making 596 recommendations, 98% of which were accepted by the providers.

The full 'Edtech Examined' report can be downloaded via tinyurl.com/ts156-LL3

IDEAS FOR TEACHING... HISTORY

My approach to teaching history is to put the subject first – I'm a *history teacher*, as opposed to a 'teacher who teaches history'. I'm always thinking about what I want to teach, before thinking about how I'm going to teach it.

You've got to think about what makes your subject distinctive. For me, what sets history apart are the relationships between story and narrative, and evidence and interpretation. During a standard lesson, my typical approach will be to try and do as much as we can to bring the world of the past to life through stories, accompanied by visuals and props where possible, with a focus on human connection, including tales of specific individuals and events to hook students in.

I like to think of my lessons as being like connected beads on a string. The students undertake an inquiry journey with an overarching question, so that there's a sense of progression and continuity from one lesson to the next.

CROSS-COLLABORATION

One benefit of setting up a new school from scratch, as we have done at Avanti Grange, has been getting to write an entirely new curriculum. Being the school's only history teacher at the time, I was essentially able to include what I liked, and it led to me working more closely than I might have done otherwise with colleagues in other departments.

Often, English teachers will work together, maths teachers will work together and historians will work together, without much in the way of talk or collaboration across departments. In this instance, I soon found myself working closely with the school's subject lead for English, Mark Nichols, discussing the potential links between what we were both teaching.

Early on in Y7, for example, we were looking at the role the medieval Islamic world played in the survival of ancient texts, with many ancient Greek texts being translated into Arabic and preserved in Islamic libraries, at a time when those texts were being destroyed in Europe. Mark was teaching Y7s about ancient Greek

mythology at around the same time, so we established these links between the survival of the stories that they were reading in English, as well as the survival of philosophical texts by the likes of Plato and Aristotle, which they were studying in philosophy, religion and ethics.

These kinds of cross-curricular links can be really important. When students encounter knowledge in one subject and then come across it somewhere else, their retention of that knowledge is strengthened by their ability to view and apply it in different contexts.

CHALLENGING NARRATIVES

The more we can 'storify' history, the better, but we also have to challenge those narratives. We can't simply present students with a single story for them to lap up, absorb and memorise. We have to get across that what historians do is piece multiple stories together like a jigsaw based on the available evidence, while at the same time negotiating areas of uncertainty and gaps in the source material.

Of course, it's also possible to assemble alternative interpretations and versions of those stories in the service of a present day purpose or motivation, which requires some level of critical thinking to fully appreciate – 'Who's telling me this? Where did they get their information from and can I trust them?' We're hopefully making history memorable, but also making it analytical and critical at the same time.



ELIZABETH CARR IS ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AND CURRICULUM AND SUBJECT LEAD FOR HUMANITIES AT AVANTI GRANGE SECONDARY SCHOOL, BISHOP'S STORTFORD, AND THE RECENTLY ANNOUNCED OVERALL WINNER OF THE INAUGURAL INSPIRING HISTORY TEACHING AWARDS ORGANISED BY HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES; FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT [HRP.ORG.UK](https://hrp.org.uk)



On the radar *Technical education*



As Andy Burnham introduces the offer of technical subjects to schools across the country, Emma Slater, lead practitioner at Access Education and former Head of English, discusses why this could cause an educational gap...

While government plans to integrate technical subjects further into core education are a step in the right direction to support growing interest in the computing sector, they raise the question of whether this could actually widen the digital divide for students

with limited access to modern tech and industry links.

Interest in computing as a subject has surged over the past decade, driven by a world increasingly reliant on AI and cybersecurity. GCSE entries have jumped 40%, while A Level entries are up 20%, showing a strong appetite for digital skills among young people. However, not every school can keep up with these new demands due to outdated equipment, teacher shortages or a lack of training time. With schools already struggling to boost engagement and performance, introducing large-scale curriculum changes without

sufficient planning and support creates risk.

While well-resourced schools will thrive and give their pupils a major advantage in the jobs market, less fortunate students could be left behind, thus deepening the existing inequalities of our education system.

Curriculum reform will clearly be needed in these rapidly growing subjects, but that can't happen in a vacuum. We therefore call on the government and the DfE to ensure that vulnerable students and underfunded schools receive the extra help they'll need if they're to adapt to these changes.

TRENDING

Our pick of the recent resources and launches teachers might find useful...

LISTEN IN

Smart and refreshingly honest, 'No Running in the Corridors' is a podcast that unpicks the rules shaping your school day. Every episode, host Helen Mulley invites two guests into her special secret meeting room and reveals a long-standing school rule that's up for debate - from extreme hairstyles to term-time holidays. Listen wherever you get your podcasts.

STRUCTURAL CELEBRATIONS

The Imagine Awards 2026 are now open for entries, with a deadline of Friday 23rd October. Run by the Thornton Education Trust, the awards celebrate primary and secondary teachers who have incorporated the built environment and architecture into their classroom teaching. Entry is free and projects of all scales are welcome.

tinyurl.com/ts156-LL5

USE THIS

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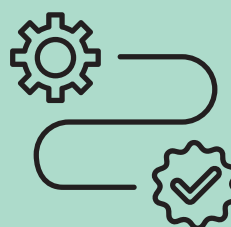
Your lecturers will likely be called by their first names, and you probably won't need to wear uniform. Your resits will be taking place in a mature, relaxed atmosphere.



3

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Got a great learning idea? Email editor@teachsecondary.com or tweet us at @teachsecondary

ENGLISH



Collins

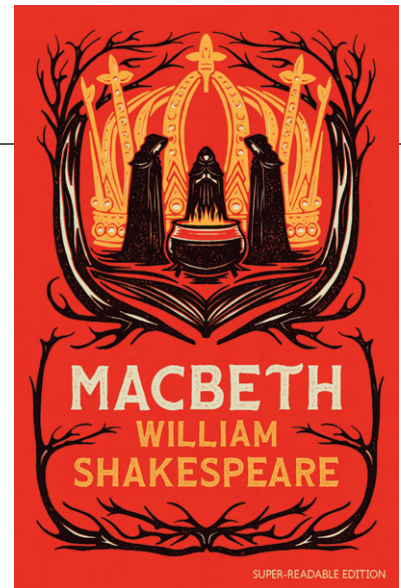
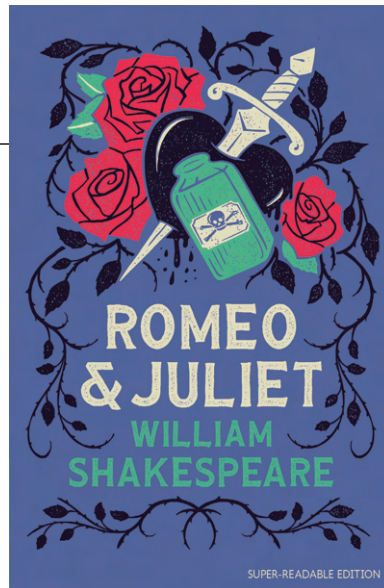
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AT A GLANCE

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REVIEWED BY: JOHN DABELL



Without the right kind of support and resourcing in place, students with dyslexia risk falling behind academically and facing reduced life chances. Given the poor outcomes and personal struggles typically associated with dyslexia, teachers are understandably keen to make use of interventions and supports that can successfully improve reading outcomes for this group – and yet in the majority of schools you're unlikely to encounter an especially wide choice when it comes to dyslexia-friendly books.

Thankfully, however, Barrington Stoke is on hand to help plug the gap, being a specialist publisher of books produced with the needs of dyslexic readers of all abilities very much in mind. As such, it knows full well that students with dyslexia specifically experience difficulties with *processing written information*, and gives this due consideration when it comes to the 'user experience' of its titles.

The books under consideration here – specialist editions of those Shakespearean mainstays *Romeo & Juliet* and *Macbeth* – therefore employ a unique, dyslexia-friendly typeface to facilitate smoother and easier reading, combined with highly accessible, clutter-free layouts and generous spacing to allow for student notes. Moreover, the pages in question are printed on an off-white heavier paper

stock designed to reduce visual stress and improve focus by preventing overleaf print from showing through.

Seemingly small features like this ultimately combine to make a huge difference, by removing barriers to reading, building confidence and promoting inclusion in the classroom.

As for the content of these recent additions to the Barrington Stoke catalogue, you'll already know that they're two of Shakespeare's most famous plays. Both include the full, unabridged text, based on the 'Alexander Text' of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (but no foreword or explanatory content, making them suitable for the exam hall), and are presented as fully accessible versions, complete with larger print, easy-to-read fonts and expanded line spacing on matt buff paper.

At the end of the day, all reading is good reading, right? Not if you happen to be dyslexic, and only have access to texts that are at odds with your needs. What makes these books stand out is that they emphasise accessibility first and foremost, attend to the considerations that really matter and go all-in on friendly formatting.

The publication of dyslexia-friendly books like this is an essential step towards making great literature available to everyone. They're the sort of thoughtful,

yet essential resources that can facilitate an easier reading experience and greater inclusion at a stroke – when used by capable teachers implementing carefully considered practice, of course...

**teach
SECONDARY**

VERDICT

- ✓ Reduces visual noise and supports comprehension
- ✓ Excellent use of design, layouts and paper selection
- ✓ Generous line, character and word spacing
- ✓ Ideal for all students with additional literacy or neurodiversity needs
- ✓ Effective, accessible and enjoyable

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For more information, visit collins.co.uk/pages/barrington-stoke

REVISION



Access GCSEPod



access

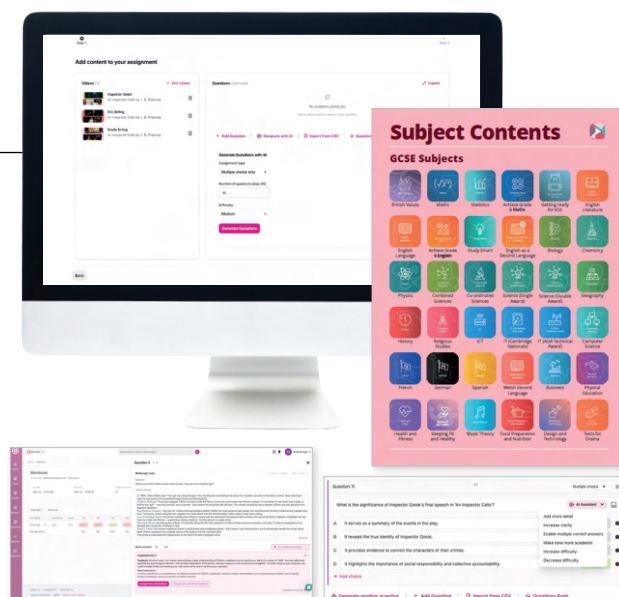
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A digital learning platform designed to improve students' outcomes while reducing teachers' workload...

AT A GLANCE

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- All Pods are mapped to specific exam board assessments
- Includes a suite of automatic marking and feedback tools
- Allows for personalised learning via a 'boost playlists' feature
- Comes with a range of accessibility features, including dyslexia-friendly fonts and support for over a hundred different languages
- AI Teacher Tools to support marking, assignment creation and lesson planning

REVIEWED BY: RUTH ASTLEY



Finding homework that grabs students' attention can be both tricky and extremely labour-intensive for teaching staff. Having recently reviewed Access GCSEPod, though, I believe it could make a real difference.

Access GCSEPod is built around a library of over 13,000 'Pods' – concise 3- to 5-minute videos that use clear narration matched to simple, yet effective graphics to deliver revision content across over 30 subjects.

Units are clearly mapped out to include necessary vocabulary, knowledge content and learning and revision tips, and are aligned to all major exam boards. The platform goes much further than simply supporting homework delivery, though. Because of how it's structured, it could also be used as a pre-teaching, revision or consolidation tool, and features built-in opportunities for teachers to develop and plan lessons. The latter will be particularly helpful for non-specialists and cover teachers, ensuring that high-quality content is delivered to students at all times.

With its user-friendly icons and layout, the platform is easy to navigate. Teachers can quickly set learning tasks by choosing from a library of pre-built assignments spanning multiple subjects. Where other platforms will often rely solely on extensive reading and basic multiple choice questions, Access GCSEPod provides a wide variety of tasks, ranging from 'watch and learn' activities to exam-style questions that closely follow the format of actual GCSE papers.

For certain subjects there are also downloadable and printable workbooks with optional answer papers. Teachers can build

their own custom assignments with a focus on particular question styles should they wish, or they can opt to use one of the platform's pre-built assessments.

It's the platform's assessment and monitoring areas that stand out the most, however, both of which are designed to maximise the amount of support students receive via a series of automated marking and feedback tools, including a marking assistant and a 'check and challenge' function. Multiple choice questions set using GCSEPod are marked instantly, thus giving children on-the-spot feedback there and then, and include scaffolded support.

Teachers will meanwhile appreciate how the reporting and monitoring dashboard affords detailed insights into students' engagement levels, with the option to filter results by class, gender, or time period. This lets you ensure that no knowledge gaps get missed, and that any interventions are targeted where they're needed most.

The platform can also automatically generate 'boost playlists' when students struggle with a specific assignment. These are tailored to whichever weakness has been identified and consist of suggestions for further practice and independent study, avoiding the need for teachers to intervene directly.

Also worth noting is how Access GCSEPod can be integrated with Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams for Schools and Students or your school's MIS to enable easy access via a single login.

Access GCSEPod is definitely worthy of closer examination. With its combination of

classroom resources, revision tools and assessment features, all instantly available via a single unified platform, it could well be the learning platform, performance booster and workload saver you've been looking for...

teach SECONDARY

VERDICT

- ✓ Offers an impressive range of exam-board aligned content spanning 30+ subjects
- ✓ Its in-depth monitoring tools enable straightforward identification of students' knowledge gaps
- ✓ Includes a range of accessibility tools to help meet the needs of SEND and EAL pupils
- ✓ The platform's visually appealing 'pods' facilitate short, sharp bursts of revision that will grab pupils' attention
- ✓ Can be used in school or at home

UPGRADE IF...

... you want a fully curriculum-aligned digital hub that supports your GCSE classroom delivery in an innovative way.

For more information, visit gcsepod.com



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Lawson is a former secondary teacher, now serving as a foundation governor while running a tutoring service, and author of the book *The Successful (Less Stressful)*

Student (Outskirts Press, £11.95); find out more at prep4successnow.wordpress.com or follow @johninpompano



THE LAST WORD

(Class)room 101



John Lawson nominates the top three teaching bugbears that he would happily place in Orwell's chamber of horrors, never to be seen again...

The popular BBC comedy series, *Room 101*, was first broadcast as a Radio 5 panel show in 1992, in which celebrity guests were invited to consign their pet peeves to oblivion. The title is a reference to the notorious torture room of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which victims are confronted with *'The worst thing in the world'* – a form of psychological suffering that draws on their own personal phobias and darkest fears.

Despite such macabre allusions, the BBC has always presented the show as light-hearted entertainment designed to appeal to that part of us that loves nothing more than a good old cathartic moan. That's why, when I was invited by Hannah Wilson and Lucy Neuburger to share my own educational *bêtes noires* with them for their own take on the format via the Education Matters podcast, I happily accepted. So what were my choices?

1. Formal observations

These can be incredibly stressful, even for experienced teachers, yet will tend to provide SLTs with only poorly focused snapshots, rather than a meaningful portrait of who this teacher really is and the kind of teacher they could become.

Who among us is ever as dynamic in period 5 on a Friday afternoon as we are during mid-morning lessons? I know that I've never been on especially scintillating form when being observed, precisely because it's *unsettling* to be evaluated by an unsmiling administrator carrying a clipboard on which is clamped a three-page observation sheet with 56 tick boxes. Too often, formal observations can make you feel as though an intruder has infiltrated the sacred space of your classroom, and we don't even know what actually ticks their boxes.

Even when engaged in something I'll do routinely, such as making cross-curricular connections, I can feel as though I'm performing in order to make a point – *'Hey, did you notice how deftly I transitioned between those differentiated activities?'*

Back when I was a head of department, I'd conduct all my observations with a blank sheet, always seek out the best features of lessons and aim to provide some constructive critique in a way that I hoped wouldn't come across as too harshly critical.

Another bugbear I have with observations is the degree to which they can be entirely

subjective, and too easily weaponised. *'Did you not see that child staring out of the window?'* *'You didn't command their attention, did you?'* *'I know the other 29 seemed reasonably engaged, but were they really?'*

There's no satisfactory answer to such comments, and ultimately no more efficient way of keeping teachers in check than to observe them teaching their most challenging classes – but please, let's not play mind games. Empathetic mentoring is often far more useful in the long run.

2. Student reports

North America is the most litigious continent in the world. As a result, teachers there can often feel discouraged from writing things down, since lawyers love nothing more than citing written reports as evidence in legal cases.

During the 17 years I spent teaching in Florida, I thus never wrote a single academic report. Instead, the school hosted two two-hour open evenings a year that parents could attend in order to discuss their child's progress. Dedicating four hours to face-to-face discussions of academic progress, rather than writing hundreds of reports, has exactly the kind of beneficial impact on teaching workloads you'd expect.

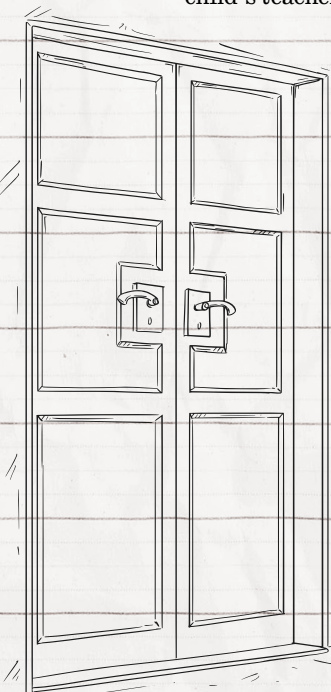
As far as anyone could tell, this never made a significant difference to any student's overall performance. Concerned parents could email their child's teachers at any time. Most didn't.

3. Phony dogmas

With all due respect, I'm not one for micromanaged school policies and practices. I don't 'write my aims and objectives on the board'; I teach them. Between lessons, I'll usually be hurrying off to grab a quick cuppa to keep my larynx lubricated, or else taking a hasty bathroom break – so please don't expect me to greet every student with warm words, hearty high-fives or a uniform check.

I shower every day and dress professionally, but I'm uncomfortable wearing a suit jacket. And don't complain about my 'Wall of Fame' consisting of superb artwork from my previous and current students, because I know full well that plain grey walls won't inspire the learners in my classroom.

I'm happy to say that I've been invited back for a 'part 2' of the podcast – so what are *your* top three school annoyances...?



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