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Hello!

And welcome. Come in, sit down, grab yourself a cuppa. After what feels like years of rain, signs of spring are on the horizon and Team Teach could not be happier about it!

In honour of (hopefully) seeing some more sun, we have some bright, uplifting content for you in this issue, ranging from successful CPD in schools to learning to love collaborative teaching again. For the former, delve into an article exploring Lakelands Primary School in Essex, which I was lucky enough to visit earlier this year. Lakelands has rolled out an impressive (yet unintimidating) roster of professional development for all its classroom staff, and it's paying dividends both inside and outside the classroom. Read about what I found out, from page 27.

On the collaborative teaching front, we hear from Dr Alexis Hamlor on how to make sure combined classrooms don't result in burnout for both teachers, and how a few tweaks can help you regain your trust – and joy – in shared instruction. Check it out on page 34.

Our perks this month also come in the form of a marvellous WAGOLL from none other than comic legend himself, Andy Stanton, explaining exactly how he constructed the monstrously funny Mr Gum, and how your pupils can write their own hilariously unlikeable character. Find tips direct from Andy, as well as a link to download a fully resourced teaching pack, on page 60.

As if that's not enough, we've got a wonderful non-fiction book topic from Stephen Davies based on his new title *Young Discoverers*, all about children who have made surprising and extraordinary discoveries throughout history (think dinosaur bones, and even an ancient Viking sword…). Stephen shares plenty of ideas for how to get your pupils fully immersed in the history of it all, on page 63.

As always, thanks for reading, and I hope you're warming up a bit!

Charley

Charley Rogers, editor
@TeachPrimaryEd1 @charleytp.bsky.social

Don't miss our next issue, available from 17th May

POWERED BY...

EMMA WIGMORE discusses Ofsted's new MAT inspections, and why those in schools are essential to their success

"I've seen the strengths of trust-level accountability, and where it needs to evolve"

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ASHLEY BETTS on helping pupils master the building blocks of music with a trip to the Rhythm Cafe

"I developed five menus, building a multi-faceted rhythm model"

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JOANNA BROWN shares a lesson plan exploring children's power to protect the planet, for Earth Day

"Children will be able to reflect on this year's theme of 'Our Power, Our Planet"

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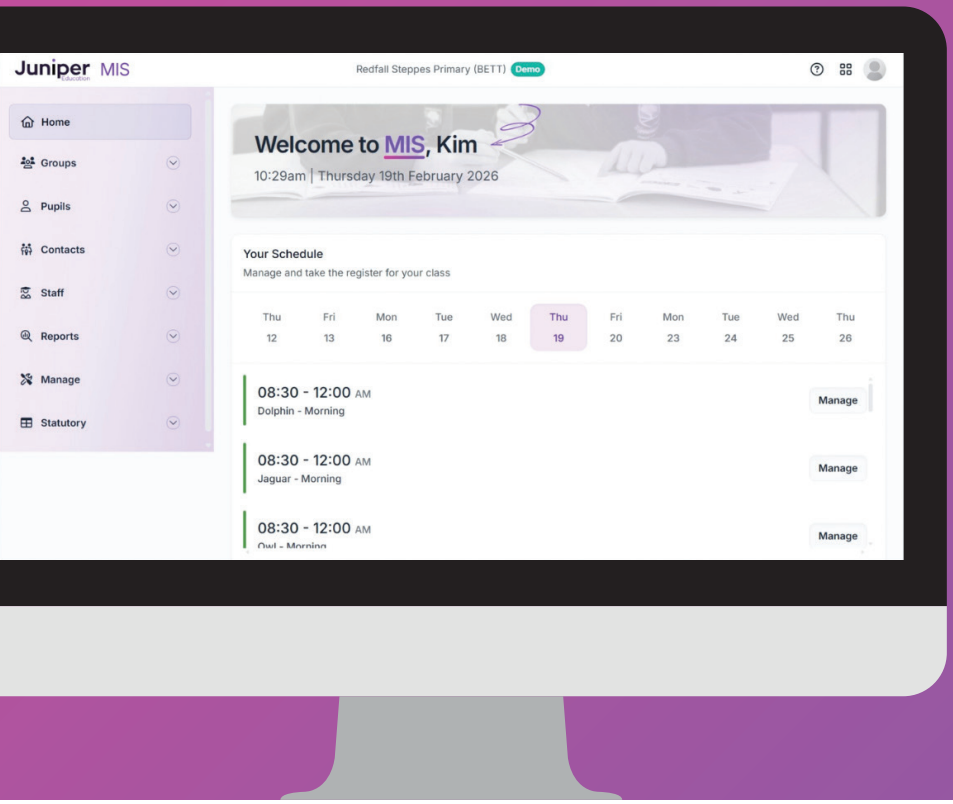

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MUSIC SPECIAL

We're all *ears!*

We want to make sure our magazine is a brilliant resource for teachers and are always striving to improve. We love hearing from real teachers about what they liked and what they would change. Got feedback about this issue? Contact us via the details in the yellow box below – we'd love to hear from you!

teach PRIMARY

We want to hear from you!

Get in touch with your rants, comments, photos and ideas.

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FEATURES

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APRIL

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What's that?

A major international study has found that most teachers receive little or no training in dyscalculia, a maths learning difficulty that affects around one in 20 children.

The research, led by Loughborough University, surveyed 1,323 education professionals across the UK, Italy, Vietnam and South Africa and found widespread gaps in training and understanding of dyscalculia – a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how children understand numbers and develop basic mathematical skills.

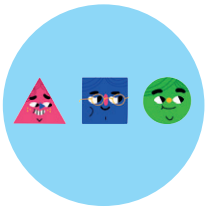
Although most UK educators had heard of dyscalculia, only 42 per cent said they clearly understood it. Just three per cent received training during initial teacher education, and only 20 per cent had completed any relevant additional training once in post.

Read the full paper at **tinyurl.com/tp-DyscalculiaEdu** and find tips on spotting the condition in our feature on page 41.

3 INSTANT LESSONS...
(You're welcome)

WALL OF HOPE
The Marcus Rashford Wall of Hope, designed for KS2 and 3, is an online resource featuring films, oral histories, activities and more, giving teachers a meaningful way to connect values of empathy, community action, inclusion and positive change. See it at **marcusrashfordmural.co.uk**

EARTHMUSEUM
EarthMuseum Learn, an award-winning, free-to-use digital platform, is designed for KS2-3, and helps teachers enrich lessons with real stories, places and cultural heritage – from biospheres to world civilisations – making complex topics accessible and engaging for all pupils. Visit **learning.earthmuseum.global**



BEYOND STEREOTYPES
Beyond Gender Stereotypes (BGS) is a new curriculum for KS2 pupils, aiming to support children to understand and build healthy relationships. It includes online CPD, lessons and teacher guidance – plus resources for families. Visit **bit.ly/BGSResources**

TODAY'S TOP RESOURCES

Hone those grammar skills

Real Grammar provides you with everything you need to teach and embed all objectives from the grammar curriculum for Years 1-6. Its five-step TEACH, PRACTISE, REVISIT, APPLY, REVISE approach has been designed to support teachers to deliver quality-first lessons and ensure consistent progress for all pupils. Visit **plazoom.com/real-grammar**

The best books so far...

The Federation of Children's Book Groups (FCBG) has unveiled the shortlist for the 2026 Children's Book Award; the only national children's book prize voted for entirely by young readers. Past winners include literary icons such as Patrick Ness, Malorie Blackman, Anthony Horowitz and Michael Morpurgo, and this year's shortlist comprises: *Creepy Pair of Underwear!* by Aaron Reynolds & Peter Brown; *Gozzle* by Julia Donaldson & Sara Ogilvie; *The Tortosaurus* by Katie Cottle; *There's a Shark in My Pants!* by Michelle Harrison & David Tazzyman; *Murray the Pirate* by Adam Stower; *Pablo and Splash: Roman Holiday* by Sheena Dempsey; *Supa Nova* by Chante Timothy; *Fear Files: Hide and Seek* by Christopher Edge & Mathias Ball; *My Name is Samim* by Fidan Meikle; and *The Last Dragon on Mars* by Scott Reintgen.
Learn more at **tinyurl.com/tp-CBA26**

Collaborative creativity

A three-year national pilot has shown that embedding teaching for creativity in classrooms can improve pupil engagement and help rekindle teachers' passion for their profession.

Eight Creativity Collaboratives ran across England in a programme evaluated by Durham University and funded by Arts Council England, championing the idea that creativity should not be an optional extra in schools but instead should be nurtured across all subjects and education settings.

More than 4,400 primary pupils, 1,300 secondary pupils, 500 teachers and 100 senior leaders took part in the evaluation. Nicholas Serota, chair of Arts Council England, said: "Creativity Collaboratives have ignited children's enthusiasm for learning, increased teachers' confidence, and supported schools to embed creativity." Read more at **tinyurl.com/tp-CreativityCollabs**

65% of teachers in England say school values matter most when deciding on a new job*

*DfE

Look ahead | Book ahead

WALK TO SCHOOL WEEK
Pupils will take on this year's challenge from 18-22 May, by embarking on Mission Move, where they'll team up with friendly secret agents to explore all the great benefits of walking or wheeling to school. Visit **livingstreets.org.uk/wtsw**

NATIONAL NUMERACY DAY
Celebrated on 20 May, this campaign from the charity National Numeracy celebrates numbers and how they are used in everyday life. This year's theme is Count on Your Community, and you can download your free toolkit at **tinyurl.com/tp-NND26**

National Numeracy Day

Q & A

© Ulrike Rindermann

Corinne Bailey Rae

Singer and author

What was primary school like?
I absolutely loved primary school. I went to quite a small school in Leeds, and I still remember all my teachers. There was a lot of outside time, and a lot of art; we even baked bread. We also had the chance to take part in loads of music, and I was in orchestras. I played the violin and recorder. I also loved being read to, which happened a lot – it was just really magical. It felt safe, and full of possibility.

What songs take you back to your childhood?
There are the classic primary school songs that we'd all sing together, like 'He's Got the Whole World in His Hands' or 'The Ink is Black, the Page is White'. We did a lot of group singing at school, so we didn't really think about who could sing or who couldn't, we were just all in it together. Then when I was older, I loved Mel and Kim; my sister and I loved seeing two multi-ethnic girls singing their hearts out, and we used to pretend to be them.

Why did you choose to write a book, rather than a song on this topic?
I had just had my second child in 2020, and I read to them a lot. I was thinking about what a great tool books are to wind down at the end of the day, and connect with your children. I knew I wanted to write a children's book, and about emotion – music just seemed like the perfect vehicle for that.

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6 ways to manage negative feelings in the classroom

Whilst it's tempting to try and soothe away pupils' hostility and anxiety, exploring these emotions is much more valuable

1 | DRAMATIC ENQUIRY

I'm a huge fan of Mantle of the Expert, and techniques such as hot-seating and conscience alley can be a particularly effective – and non-confrontational – way to explore difficult feelings in a non-confrontational manner. Working within a fictional context acts as a safety net, allowing children to step towards complex emotions without feeling exposed, and creating that mental space gives children permission to explore fear, anger or sadness while protecting their core sense of self.

2 | MAKE SPACE TO PLAY

Children are neurologically hard-wired to rehearse experiences through play in order to regulate their feelings and responses. Free play allows children to articulate a full range of emotion in ways that language sometimes cannot. As practitioners, there can be an understandable impulse to smooth over difficult feelings or distract children so they feel better. But *better* is subjective. While distraction is tempting, and deescalation is a priority in a busy classroom, timetabling ad-hoc opportunities to process emotions through play can be hugely valuable in the long term, supporting resilience, emotional literacy and self-regulation.

3 | EMOTIONAL BIASES

There's nothing quite like teaching a class of children to awaken your own inner child, and this can create real emotional dissonance. For many of us, high-level emotion feels frightening; not because of the feeling itself, but because of the shame pattern we have learned to anticipate in the aftermath. The key is recognising that it's not the intensity of a child's emotion that matters most, but how we are seen to respond to it. If we feel triggered, it's often because we're anticipating judgement. As teachers, we have the opportunity to reshape this dynamic through patience and kindness, modelling healthier responses for children and for ourselves.

FRANCES STICKLEY is a bestselling children's author, primary school teacher and literacy specialist with a background in teaching children permanently excluded from mainstream education. Her new book, *The Storm Cloud*, illustrated by Emily Hamilton (£12.99, Post Wave) is out in April.

4 | POETRY AND STORYTELLING

The simple act of reading poetry aloud cannot be underestimated. Rhythm, repetition and melody have a powerful soporific, psychological effect, particularly when a child is overwhelmed or overstimulated.

Often, frustration around negative feelings comes from an inability to articulate exactly what's going on internally, and poetry opens up new pathways into language, offering metaphors, analogous models and images that help children name and externalise emotions safely.

5 | SHARING PICTURE BOOKS

Not all children have the same mental framework for visualising the world, and picturebooks in particular are invaluable for scaffolding this capacity.

Visualisation activates the same neural pathways as real-life experience, helping to regulate the parasympathetic nervous system. When paired with sensitive, emotionally literate writing, picturebooks can be a powerful tool for emotional regulation. They offer children a way to 'see' feelings, giving shape and colour to emotions that might otherwise feel overwhelming. Shared reading also creates a calm, connected space where pupils can process feelings collectively and without pressure.

6 | NORMALISE FEELINGS

One of the most powerful tools we have is the language we use every day. Normalising negative feelings, such as frustration, anger, jealousy and fear, helps children understand that these emotions are not problems to be fixed but often integral to achieving our goals.

Naming emotions as they arise, without judgement, reduces shame and models emotional literacy. Simple phrases such as *"It's okay to feel cross, let's work out what helps"* can shift a child from dysregulation to connection. Over time, this consistent language builds trust, resilience, and a classroom culture where emotions are acknowledged rather than suppressed.

tinyurl.com/tp-FrancesStickley

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Social bans won't solve the problem...

Preventing under-16s from using social media might look like decisive action – but is that just ignoring the real issue?

If banning social media for under-16s were a silver bullet for children's mental health, classrooms would already be calm, focused and blissfully screen-free. They aren't. And that should tell us something. Let me be clear from the start: safeguarding children matters and is always the priority. Boundaries matter. Adults doing something about the mental health crisis facing young people absolutely matters.

But banning social media for under-16s? That's not the solution. It's a comforting idea dressed up as decisive action and it risks missing the real problem entirely.

In primary schools, the impact of digital overload doesn't look like children glued to TikTok mid-lesson. It looks far more ordinary than that; like pupils who struggle to sit with a book for five minutes. Children who abandon a maths problem at the first hint of difficulty. Classes where quiet thinking feels oddly uncomfortable, as if stillness itself has become unfamiliar.

Children have changed. Teachers see this every day. And no amount of legislation will change what's happening in those moments.

The truth is, children's brains are being trained, very efficiently, by platforms built around speed, novelty and instant reward. Scroll, swipe, dopamine hit, repeat. That training clashes spectacularly with what learning actually requires: patience, memory, effort and emotional regulation.

This isn't about children being lazy or teachers 'losing control'. It's about a mismatch between the digital environments in which children are immersed, and the cognitive demands we place on them in school. Which is why the current obsession with bans feels like a distraction.

Safeguards, clear age boundaries and sensible policies around devices are essential. No argument there. But prohibition alone doesn't teach self-control; it doesn't build resilience, and it doesn't help children understand why their attention feels fractured, or why their emotions feel harder to manage.

In fact, bans often have the opposite effect. They push behaviour underground, delaying the problem rather than solving it. And they leave children unprepared for the moment – because it will come – when restrictions lift and the digital world is suddenly wide open.

Primary school is where attention habits are formed. This is the window when children learn to persist, tolerate challenges and sit with uncertainty and effort. If we wait until secondary school to address digital self-regulation, or outsource the problem to legislation, we've already missed the most important opportunity. What children actually need are skills.

They need to learn how attention works, how habits form and how certain apps make them feel wired rather than calm. We need to teach them how to notice when their brain is overloaded and what to do about it. They need help building what I think of as cognitive fitness – the mental equivalent of stamina, strength and balance. Focus, after all, works like a muscle. It grows through gentle resistance. You don't build it by removing every challenge. You build it by practising.

In practical terms, this shouldn't be too complicated. For schools, it's about protecting space for focus – silent reading, retrieval practice, device-free problem solving – and explicitly teaching children how learning actually happens. Not just what to learn, but how.

For parents, it's about boundaries with purpose. Phones out of bedrooms. Clear start and stop times. Tech-free zones for homework and meals. But also, conversations that go beyond rules: "How does this app make your brain feel?" "Do you feel calmer or more agitated afterwards?"

For children, the message should be empowering, not punitive. One screen at a time. Notifications off when learning. High-effort activities before high-dopamine ones. Learning that boredom isn't dangerous, it's often the doorway to deeper thinking.

This matters even more for children with SEND or anxiety, who benefit from explicit teaching, predictability and supported practice. A blanket ban doesn't reduce their cognitive load; it often increases it.

Protecting children from harm matters. But preparing them for the world they're growing up in matters just as much. And that work doesn't start in Parliament. It starts in primary classrooms, quietly, every day, when we teach children how to focus, how to regulate themselves, and how to live with the digital world, rather than pretending it isn't there. **TP**

Dr Tej Samani is an education and learning coach and creator of My Performance Learning.

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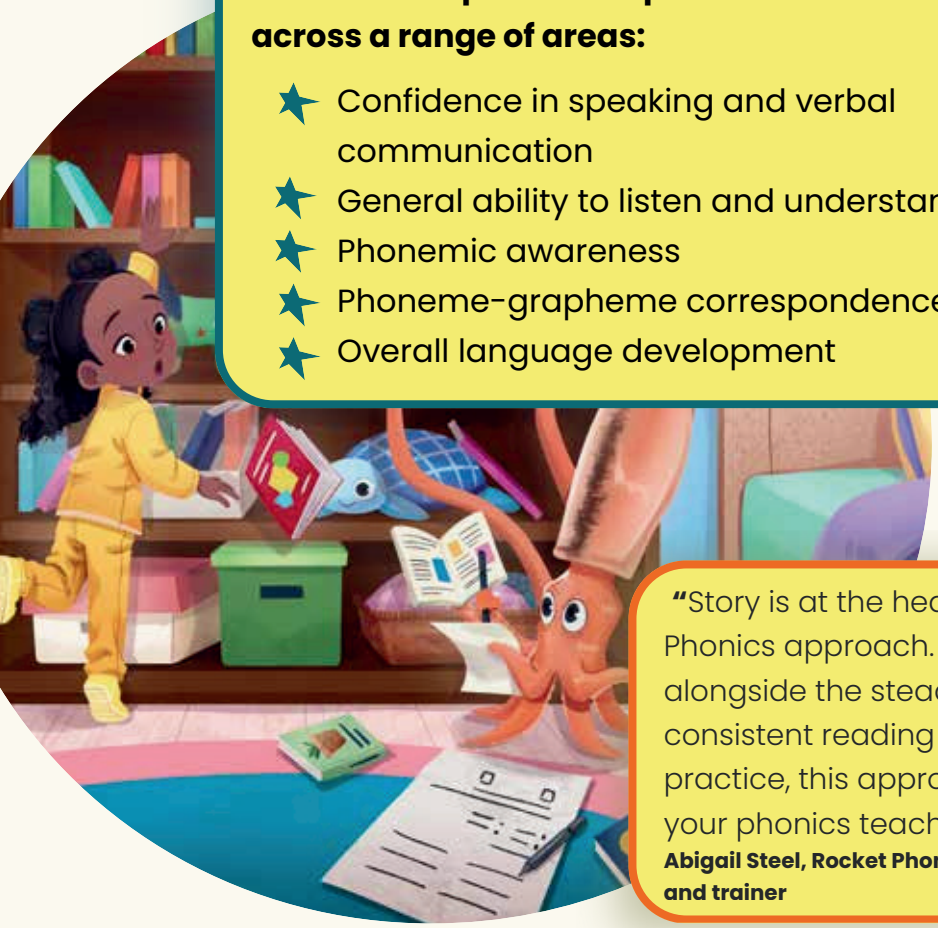

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Abigail Steel, Rocket Phonics author, consultant and trainer

The case for more male primary school teachers

Should our settings for younger pupils be actively trying to recruit more men?

menteachprimary.wordpress.com

Do we need more men in primary education? It's a question that surfaces almost every year, and politicians, parents and school leaders tend to agree that the answer is *yes*. After all, recent data from the Department for Education (2024) shows just how big the gender imbalance is, with only around 15 per cent of primary teachers being male – in the early years, the figure drops to roughly three per cent. Explaining *why* we need more men in the workforce, however, is not as straightforward as it first appears.

Over the last couple of years, while researching and writing about men in primary education, I assumed making the case would be easy. But the more I read, the more confusing everything became. Why? Because two tensions sit at the heart of the debate. First is the reality that what our children need are great teachers. Skilled practitioners with passion, empathy and adaptability. And these traits are, of course, universal, not gendered.

Second is the persistent belief that men bring something *different*: 'manly' qualities that our children, and particularly our boys, supposedly need. The most common arguments made have been repeated for so long that they are rarely questioned. That men are needed to sort out behaviour and to act as 'father figures'. Or that men are needed to raise boys' attainment. These beliefs are flawed, because they are based on assumptions, not evidence. Research has consistently shown that discipline strategies are not defined by gender. And international studies on teacher-student gender matching have found no real evidence that male teachers improve boys' grades.

So, if teacher quality is the single most important factor in who stands in front of our children, and if the traditional arguments for wanting men do not hold up under scrutiny, then why do we continue to talk about teacher gender at all? For me, the answer lies not at an individual level, but at a workforce level. The imbalance matters, because the absence of men sends a powerful message about who we expect to care for and teach our children.

For example, when pupils regularly see men leading phonics sessions, reading stories (with 'the voices'), running art projects, or simply sitting with a child who is struggling, it widens their sense of what it means to be a man. In our increasingly gendered world, where social media is doing its own form of teaching, ensuring our children experience a wide range of people is vitally important.

At a societal level, more men thriving in schools would help dismantle the outdated idea that teaching children is a woman's domain. It would also help to alleviate the social stigma that is associated with men who choose to work with younger children. As outliers in their settings, these men can be unfairly scrutinised for the work that they do. This fear of public judgment is a significant barrier to recruitment and a key reason why some men decide to leave.

The million-dollar question is this: how do we get more men to join the profession? Any serious efforts to increase gender diversity must start with the challenges impacting all staff. The education system needs increased government support to effectively manage the pressures around attendance, behaviour and the complexity of additional pupil needs, because recruitment will remain a struggle if the job is unsustainable. Schools also have the power to build a more inclusive environment. From reviewing parental leave policies for gender bias, to working more closely with local fathers, these efforts can lead to meaningful change. However, the area that I believe will bear the most fruit is the long-term work of breaking gender stereotypes in our schools. Research from the Fawcett Society (2020) showed that schools are still upholding gendered norms. This means we must take more responsibility for the messages we send, whether that's in the stories we read, the behaviours we praise or the bias we challenge. If we get this right, then more children will grow up seeing teaching as a real possibility. **TP**

Mike Keys is a primary teacher and assistant headteacher. In 2020, he co-founded Men Teach Primary, a social media network for men to share and celebrate their passion for primary teaching. His book,* Men in Primary Education *(£21.99, SAGE), is out now.

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Each issue we ask a contributor to pen a note they would love to send

A letter to... Ofsted

For Ofsted's new MAT inspections to work, inspectors must listen carefully to the people shaping school improvement from within, says **Emma Wigmore**

As any fan of a certain regency drama knows, it only takes one whispered bulletin from Lady Whistledown to stop the Ton in its tracks. Wouldn't it be wonderful if teachers could command that same attention from those shaping education policy? We are, after all, the ones on the ground who see it all, every day. Which is exactly why our voices matter, not least to inform the new multi-academy trust (MAT) inspections that have recently been announced.

As CEO of a trust serving 21 primary schools, I'm one of the few leaders who has already experienced an Ofsted MAT inspection under a previous framework. It has shown me both the strengths of trust-level accountability and where it needs to evolve. The trusts Ofsted will inspect are not uniform organisations; they are collections of very different schools, each serving distinct communities. When I took on this role, half our schools were 'at risk'. We chose to take on that challenge, knowing improvement would take time, but it was the right thing to do for the children. Today, 20 of our 21 schools are rated 'good', but this required working alongside them over the long term. This is something the new inspection framework must recognise.

Let me take you back to one of those schools, which had been placed in special measures for nearly two decades. When we arrived in 2016, the to-do list was daunting: rebuild the ethos, repair relationships between adults and children, re-establish trust with families, ensure the children came first. Teaching quality mattered, of course, but it was just one strand. We spent years training staff, investing in SEND support, re-engaging parents and restoring a sense of safety. Only then could we focus on curriculum and outcomes. The year the school finally received a 'good' judgement – its first in 17 years – those Year 6 pupils had experienced just 12 months of a genuinely good education. Of course, they're unlikely to meet national expectations, yet that's what we're being judged on.

And this is where I believe the risk lies with the new MAT inspections. Ofsted's most recent inspection data shows that around 10 per cent of state-funded schools in England are currently rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate'. Many of those schools could benefit from the additional support and capacity provided by a multi-academy trust. However, if the new framework focuses on immediate outcomes, it may discourage trusts from taking on the schools that need us most. A trust leader cannot, in good conscience, walk past a struggling school simply because its data might drag down our averages. To avoid this, Ofsted must take into account progress over time to understand the context of a trust's performance. This includes its starting point, the journey and the vision of each trust. And I must emphasise the word *each*. By their size and nature, trusts are inherently different from each other and therefore have their own unique ways of operating, just like the schools they strive to serve.

> *"Trusts are collections of schools each serving distinct communities"*

I personally welcome a new accountability framework. Parents and teachers deserve assurance that their trust is performing well. But a meaningful MAT inspection should blend quantitative data with qualitative insight.

Inspectors must see beyond numbers and spend time with the people who live the journey – the children, their families, the support staff and the classroom teachers. During our inspection, the team spoke extensively with our leaders, and whilst that insight is undoubtedly valuable, I would like to see a closer examination of how trusts operate in daily practice.

So please, Ofsted, as you draw up your new framework, let the people you inspect be your inspiration. In the words of Lady Whistledown, the social season is upon us. Pilot inspections offer a chance to meet with and listen to trust leaders, teachers, pupils and families about what meaningful accountability looks like. Step into classrooms and playgrounds. Talk to teachers and pupils and hear their stories. Recognise that MATs come in all shapes and sizes. And, above all, work with us to improve outcomes for children.

From,

Emma

Emma Wigmore is CEO of the Diocese of Chelmsford Vine Schools Trust and an accomplished education leader with over 20 years' teaching experience. In 2024 she was named CEO of the Year at the MAT Excellence Awards.

vineschoolstrust.co.uk linkedin.com/in/emmawigmore/

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UNDERCOVER TEACHER

Our anonymous educator gets something off their chest

How have we let the staffroom – once a peaceful haven for teachers – become such a toxic space?

The staffroom. A Room of Requirement for educators. A safe haven to come to in the morning to greet your colleagues and set yourself up for the day. A space for nourishment when a boost is needed mid-morning, or even an opportunity to share weekend plans while recommending restaurants and films to watch.

It's somewhere educators go to breathe. It has never been glamorous. The chairs are rarely comfortable, the mugs are usually stained, and there is often a questionable smell. But the staffroom has always had one crucial role: it has been a place to recover. Or at least, it used to be.

Somewhere over the last 10 years, and I am not sure exactly when this happened, there was a shift in the energy. Now, stepping into the staffroom feels less like entering a sanctuary and more like walking into a live broadcast of collective stress. It takes very little time at all to gauge the temperature of the room.

Someone is frustrated about a new policy; someone else is dissecting the email received from SLT at 8pm last night – and loudly highlighting how that affected their wellbeing. Another colleague is delivering a detailed analysis of a decision made by someone who is, notably, not in the room. Every time the door opens, the conversation simmers as people check who is entering the space. Many staffrooms across the country are now a place where pressures are amplified, not eased.

Now let's be honest, venting is inevitable. Teaching is demanding work. There are days when the photocopier jams right before the lesson, the WiFi disappears just as you try to load a video, and a child spills the contents of a paint pot while your back is turned for two seconds.

We need a space where we can offload these moments, and always have done. A quick eye roll over a coffee can be surprisingly therapeutic – but there is a point where venting stops being a release and has an infectious impact on those around us.

"It feels like walking into a broadcast of collective stress"

This is how a staff culture can shift at speed. Conversations become shared tales of woe, with complaints being repeated, polished slightly each time, until they feel more like permanent truths.

I am not suggesting for a second that teachers enjoy these conversations; they simply become the default soundtrack to the room. Newer staff come in and quickly pick up on the negativity in the space. They choose to either stay away or get drawn into the escalating debates. Negativity, as it turns out, is remarkably contagious.

Of course, not everyone participates. A subtle second culture is developing alongside this louder one, where teachers eat their lunch in their classrooms, take a walk around the playground or even retreat to their cars for a moment of silence. They are not antisocial, but seeking something the staffroom once reliably offered.

On the whole, we as teachers are not particularly negative people. Most of us are deeply committed professionals, navigating the day-to-day with limited time to decompress. But the staffroom culture has a strange power. The tone of the room becomes the tone of the workplace.

The good news is that staffroom culture, like school culture, isn't fixed. It shifts surprisingly quickly when enough people are willing to change the conversation. A shared laugh, a moment of genuine encouragement, or even the brave decision to steer a discussion away from the usual spiral can alter the mood of an entire breaktime.

I do not pretend the staffroom will ever be perfect; it never was. But let's consider what the space was originally meant to be: not a pressure cooker for professional frustration, but a brief refuge from it.

Anyone who works within education spends their days giving away so much of themselves. I know, I do it myself, and I see my colleagues doing the same. We all need a space that can quietly give us a little back. TP

The author is a teacher in England.

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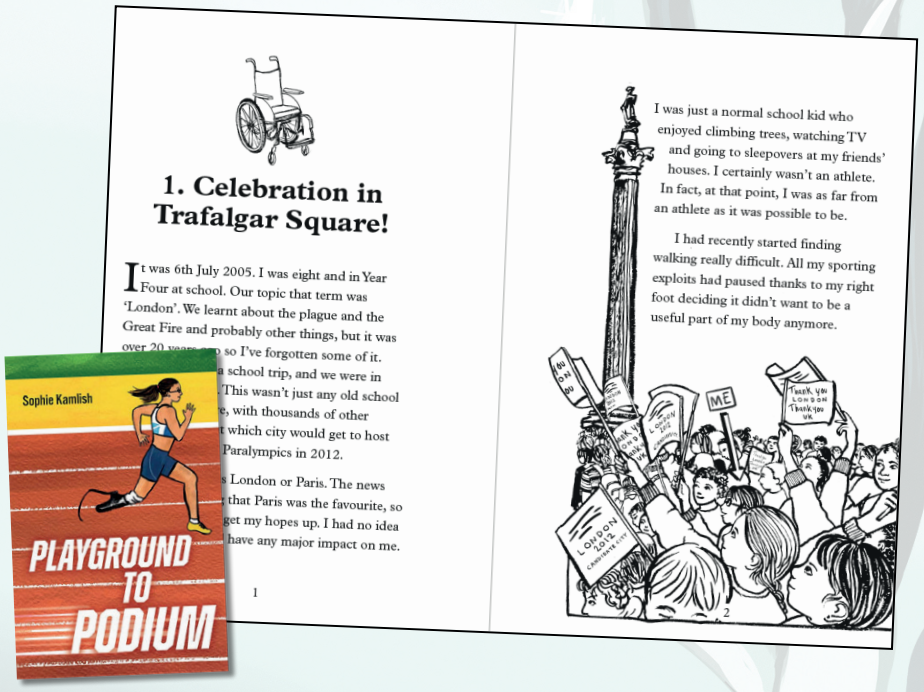

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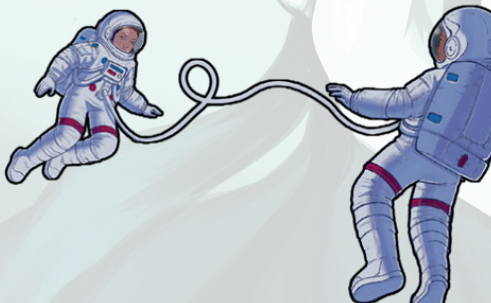

5 REASONS TO TRY... Leading English

Adam Lowing explains how Leading English combines in-school support with over 200 medium-term units to transform your English provision...

30 SECOND BRIEFING

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2 VISION AND PLANNING

Next comes the first of three in-school consultancy days. It's held anywhere between one and three months ahead of the project launch and focuses on vision and planning. The visit will include: a strategy session with the headteacher; planning and co-design with the subject lead; pupil voice sessions; CPD for the implementation team (slides provided).

The Leading English team help leaders to foster genuine alignment between what's written and what's taught – research shows this is critical to pupil outcomes. We advocate for curriculum-embedded assessment that helps teachers adapt in real time, and support schools in embedding spoken language across the curriculum. Our units ensure oracy is part of English, not an optional extra.

Leading English

Contact:
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3 IMPLEMENTATION

The second consultancy visit takes place one to two months after the project launches, and centres on implementation. Here we will: hold a review session with the subject leader; operate co-planning, team teaching and drop-ins; organise pupil voice sessions and feedback; lead a CPD session (INSET or after school).

Implementation is not intended to result in perfection overnight. At Leading English, we encourage iterative improvement: small tweaks, informed by staff voice, lesson observation and reflection. We believe in the importance of manageable, meaningful practice including modelling and more sentence-level control. We help you to bring this thinking into the classroom through practical strategies and supportive coaching.

4 REVIEW AND EVALUATION

The final visit in the first year takes place three to six months post-launch and supports sustainability. It includes: a final review of the implementation plan; pupil voice and classroom observation; strategic CPD and leadership guidance; evaluation of impact; formulation of next steps.

5 ONGOING SUPPORT

Ahead of each project day, you'll receive a 30-minute planning call. CPD slides and visit notes are provided.

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"Today's experience helped me develop my leadership skills and increased my confidence in leading a whole-school project."
A Carter, Primary English lead

MEDIUM TERM PLAN

KS2
RE

EID AL-ADHA
(AND OTHER FESTIVALS)

MATTHEW LANE

Eid al-Adha is a Muslim festival of major significance, yet it is often given less attention in RE curriculums than Eid al-Fitr, which follows Ramadan.

Eid al-Adha connects closely to core Islamic themes of faith and obedience, making it a great starting point for exploring Islam. The emphasis on giving and generosity during Eid al-Adha allows for comparisons with festivals in other religions and worldviews, such as Rosh Hashanah or Harvest. Across the six lessons in this unit, we will explore Eid al-Adha and then find shared themes and make links between religions.

This unit structure is a favourite of mine: three lessons on one religion or worldview looking at a specific aspect. Then, using this as a launchpad for exploring how the same beliefs or lived experiences can be found in other religions or worldviews under different names or from different starting points.

WEEK 1

Learning objective

- To know the story of Ibrahim (Abraham) and understand its importance to Muslims.

Begin the unit by recapping any prior learning about Islam, or by introducing Islam if pupils have not encountered it before. This provides an important opportunity to address any misconceptions pupils may hold.

Introduce the Prophet Ibrahim (as) and his son Ismail (as), and discuss their importance within Islam. You can also explain that when writing names of the prophets, the letters 'as' (alayhi -s-salām) or 'pbuh' (the English translation – peace be upon him) are used as honorifics. Tell pupils that these figures are also significant in Christianity and Judaism, where they are known as Abraham and Ishmael. Pupils can then explore the story of Ibrahim (as) and Ismail (as), either using the version provided in the download (see **slides 8-9** at the link above) or your own choice of summary.

If using your own version, this should be a retelling rather than a direct extract from the Qur'an. There are specific traditions and sensitivities around using the Qur'an in lessons, and it is not advisable to print extracts, as these require careful handling and marks of respect, and cannot be disposed of in ordinary recycling. Avoid using video material for this part of the lesson, as many Muslims consider it inappropriate to depict prophets visually. Some online videos obscure faces using light or sunburst imagery, but these may still cause discomfort or offence for pupils or members of the wider school community.

After reading the story, discuss the concept of a test. Why do you think Allah tested the Prophet Ibrahim (as)? What does this story show us about Islam? Having explored these questions, children can create their own short summaries of the story **(slide 12)**. This could be as bullet points or a series of speech bubbles. Don't draw story boards for the reasons discussed earlier. Ensure that creation of the Kaba in Mecca is noted as we will be exploring this further in Lesson 2.

Assessment

Can children retell a short version of the story? Can they recall the key meaning or themes from the story?

WEEK 2

Learning objective

- To understand that Eid al-Adha is the 'Greater Eid' and marks the end of Hajj.

This lesson connects the story of Ibrahim to the present day. Explain that millions of Muslims every year travel to Mecca in Saudi Arabia to follow in the footsteps of Ibrahim and his family. This pilgrimage is called Hajj, and it is one of the Five Pillars of Islam (the five most important duties for a Muslim). While Lesson 1 focused on a historical story, Lesson 2 is about a living, global event.

Begin by recapping the Five Pillars and what each one is and means in practice **(slide 15)**. Then, clarify that while there are two Eids, Eid al-Adha is known as the 'Greater Eid' because of

its link to this sacred journey and its focus on ultimate devotion.

Note that both Eids are connected to their own Pillars **(slide 16)**.

Read through a Hajj guide (such as this one from charity Islamic Relief: **tinyurl.com/tp-IRHajj)** and briefly explore the different locations and what they mean. On a world map, explore where Mecca is and other holy sites associated with Hajj. Watch the BBC video My Life, My Religion: Islam – What is Hajj? **(tinyurl.com/tp-BBCHajj)**. Discuss what you see in the video and how this can be compared with gatherings in other religions.

End the lesson by summarising the events of Hajj **(slides 17-23)**. You could either label a map of the region with each of the sites and then note their significance, or create a short piece of writing to briefly record each location in order, and why it is important to Muslims.

Assessment

Can children recall the purpose of Hajj?

WEEK 3

Learning objective

- To describe how Eid al-Adha is celebrated in the UK and globally.

Now that pupils understand the history (Ibrahim) and the journey (Hajj), this lesson focuses on the party that follows. Explain that while the Hajj happens in one place (Mecca), Eid al-Adha is celebrated by nearly 1.7 billion people worldwide. In the UK, this often involves taking time off school or work to be with family.

A central part of Eid al-Adha is the Qurbani (sacrifice). Explain that in the UK, families usually arrange this through a local butcher or an international charity. Introduce the 'Rule of Three' for the meat and how it is shared equally among three groups:

1. The family: to enjoy a festive feast. This includes the meat from the sacrifice with foods usually savoury in nature. This is why Eid al-Adha is called the 'Savoury Eid' compared to the 'Sweet Eid' of Eid al-Fitr, when sweets are often shared.

2. Friends and neighbours.
3. The poor, or those in need.

Be careful to explain that not all Muslims will sacrifice an animal. Some will make donations to one of over 40 charities that will give food to the poor on their behalf in other parts of the world. For some Muslims, the sacrifice is obligatory (wajib) but for other traditions it is highly recommended (sunnah).

Once children are familiar with the festival, you can move on to a comparative exercise. Discuss in general terms what a festival is and how they can be celebrated. Watch a video or read a summary of how Eid al-Adha is celebrated **(slides 26-27)**. Then, using a Venn diagram or other chart, ask children to compare Eid al-Adha festivities with another festival of their choosing **(slides 28-32)**.

Assessment

Can children describe ways in which Eid al-Adha is celebrated?

WEEK 4

Learning objective

- To compare the concept of sacrifice in Islam with other religions and worldviews.

In the first three lessons, we looked at how Muslims sacrifice for God. In this lesson, we look at the word *sacrifice* more broadly. A sacrifice is giving up something valuable for the sake of something – or someone – else. Explain that while the method of sacrifice changes (giving up food, money, or time), the intent (showing devotion or love) is often a shared human value.

Discuss that the story of Ibrahim (as) isn't just an Islamic story. During Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), the story of the Akedah (the binding of Isaac/Ismail) is read. It teaches about the 'covenant' or promise between God and his people. Note that while it is the same story, it is now Isaac and not Ismail who is nearly sacrificed. This change of brother is important to the respective religions. Briefly explore Lent and how the story of Good Friday represents the ultimate sacrifice in the Christian faith.

Now children can think about *why* people make sacrifices. Provide them with nine cards featuring different reasons for sacrifice, and ask them to rank them in a Diamond 9 formation, with the most important at the top **(slide 38)**. Reasons could include:

- to show love for God
- to help people who have less than us
- to prove we are disciplined
- to celebrate a tradition
- to say "thank you" for what we have
- to remember a story from the past

You can download a blank Diamond 9 in the lesson resources at the link above.

End by discussing if a sacrifice has to be an animal or food. Can we sacrifice our time or our comfort to help someone in need?

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Assessment

Can children identify one similarity and one difference between the Islamic story of sacrifice and a tradition from another faith?

WEEK 5

Learning objective

- To link the charity of Eid al-Adha to the Christian Harvest Festival or Jewish Sukkot.

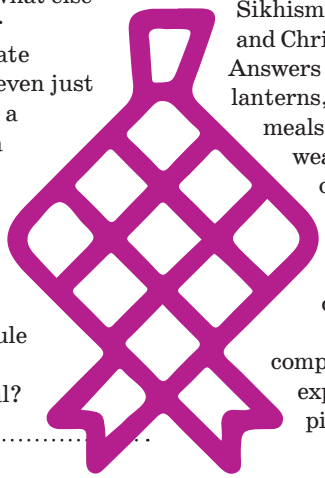
In Lesson 3, we learned about the 'Rule of Three' in Eid al-Adha. In this lesson, we look at how other religions and worldviews practice giving back to the community. While Muslims share meat during Eid, other faiths have specific times of the year where they focus on sharing the fruits of their labour. Discuss how different faiths share food to show gratitude.

You could use a simple table or a set of image cards to compare the sharing of meat during Eid al-Adha (Islam); sharing of food donations at church or Food Bank during Harvest Festival (Christianity); and Sukkot (Judaism), where a Sukkah is built and guests share meals to remember a time when their ancestors had very little **(slides 41-43).**

Discuss why food is a common theme of giving. Is it more universal than money? Revisit the discussion from the end of last lesson: if you didn't have food to give, what else could you share with your community? Can you donate kindness, time, skills, or even just a smile? Reflect on this in a short piece of writing or a longer class debate.

Assessment

Can children identify one similarity between the 'Rule of Three' in Eid and the Christian Harvest Festival?



WEEK 6

Learning objective

- To identify commonalities in how religions celebrate festivals.

To conclude the unit, we will look at the celebrations that mark the end of these times of reflection and sacrifice by believers. While the stories and the rituals are unique to each religion or worldview, the feeling of a festival often looks very similar across the world. This lesson helps pupils see that religion isn't just about theology and history; it is about the lived experience of community, belonging and joy.

Ask the class: "If you were going to bake a festival cake, what ingredients would every religion put in the bowl?" Discuss the common elements found in Eid al-Adha, Diwali (Hinduism/Sikhism), Hanukkah (Judaism), and Christmas (Christianity). Answers might include candles, lanterns, or fireworks; special meals including specific foods; wearing our best or newest outfits. These also include times for worship and prayer that is specific for the celebration **(slide 50).**

End with a making a comparison of all the festivals explored. This could be as a piece of writing, or a comparative table to demonstrate children's understanding of the whole unit. For instance, children can choose two festivals they have studied and write a short comparison (3–5 sentences). Or they could make a comparison table comparing two or three festivals in areas such as the story or reason, and the giving traditions. TP

"Religion isn't just about theology; it's about the lived experience of community"

Matthew Lane is an RE Lead, SACRE member and author. You can read more comparisons of RE knowledge in his new book, **Religious Education: A Subject Knowledge Handbook,** *coming soon from Bloomsbury.*

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School profile

Name: Lakelands Primary School
Headteacher: Koulla Anslow
Location: Colchester, Essex
Size: Approx. 60
Extra info: Part of Chelmsford Learning Partnership

Koulla Anslow, headteacher

"It's all about empowering teachers"

A thorough and supportive CPD programme has helped Lakelands School grow from the ground up into a community treasure, finds **Charley Rogers**

"It doesn't feel high stakes," says Mark Shean, teaching and learning lead, describing his experience of the thorough yet unintimidating CPD programme at Lakelands Primary School. "Every school in the Trust," (Lakelands is part of the Chelmsford Learning Partnership MAT) "has a teaching and learning team, so we have comprehensive CPD, with agreed standards and frameworks across all the schools, so we know what to expect."

But the story at Lakelands didn't begin so smoothly...

Designed to serve a new housing estate in Colchester, Essex, Lakelands opened in 2020, in the midst of the Dark Ages of lockdown. The school had only 24 children at first, despite having space for 60, and faced numerous challenges as the pandemic lingered; but it has more than pulled itself up by the bootstraps – and in fact, when I sat down with the team in early 2026, the school was oversubscribed in most year groups.

It was the fresh perspective of Lakelands that allowed it to blossom so quickly, says Koulla Anslow, who has been headteacher since the site opened. "The school is new in building and in concept," she explains. "We've worked really hard to develop our reputation in the area – when we opened during lockdown, people understandably didn't want to take chances on a new school, so we were undersubscribed for a while."

However, the school's first Ofsted inspection in May of 2023 would change all that. And quickly. "We had a really positive result from Ofsted, and word soon got out," says Koulla, "and now we've got a waiting list for almost every year group except Year 5, which is the one that started out as a group of 24" (the school hasn't yet welcomed its Year 6 cohort, but hopes to in the near future).

These are impressive statistics on any scale, but it's not just a glowing reputation with parents and children that fuels Lakelands' success. "We have an amazingly low staff turnover," Koulla tells me. "In the six years we've been open, only two teachers have left". In a landscape where teacher retention is anything but low-stakes (Teacher Tapp reports that around 40 per cent of teachers in 2025 expect to have left the profession within three years: **tinyurl.com/tp-TTretention25**), this is increasingly unusual.

Style and substance

What is it that makes Lakelands so special? "I think it has a lot to do with our professional development programme," says Koulla. "Our CPD is very carefully structured."

The programme is mapped out from the start of each year, Koulla explains. "We plan our staff meetings, as most schools do," she says, "but the difference here is that we've had the luxury of building everything from scratch."

This includes the usual roster of updates to policy and guidance, such as training on the new Writing Framework, but Koulla and her team also dedicate a certain amount of staff meeting time to coaching. "For example, we've run coaching for avoidance behaviours," Koulla says. "Sometimes that's external training, sometimes it's delivered by our SENCo. Staff receive training, and then that training feeds into our monitoring."

A process of peer review is also a big part of the CPD offer at Lakelands, allowing best practice to spread through the school, and in some cases, through the Trust. "Because our teachers are highly skilled, each one has an area they're passionate about," Koulla tells me. "They go out, receive training, bring it back, and improve practice".

Pupil Voice

"We're play leaders, which means we help set up all the OPAL stuff at playtime. We want to do an assembly thanking all the adults that help with OPAL."

"Being a play leader is great, but can be a little bit stressful, because if something happens, you want to try and resolve the problem."

"Miss Llewellyn taught us what we can say and do when someone's having a disagreement on the playground, to try and help."

"We come outside early at playtime and lunchtime to help set up all the equipment, and let the adults know if anything is broken or not working properly."

"Part of the impact of CPD is that our staff mobility is very low"

Peer review

So, what does peer review look like at Lakelands? At the start of every year, leadership teams in each school in the MAT identify staff who could become peer reviewers or improvement champions. Many have progressed through the system over the years, Mark explains, and then they receive training, using a shared framework across the Trust.

The framework is made up of pillars – assessment, engagement, creativity, and adaptation – and each school in the Trust can adapt it to suit their context; but because everyone uses the same vocabulary and expectations, feedback is clear and effective. "Each school chooses when its peer review happens," Mark says. "We chose June, so findings can feed into our school improvement plan for the following academic year."

"It's a three-step process," Mark continues. "There's a coaching session for peer reviewers two weeks before the review is planned to happen in school, for us to clarify the focus and what evidence we need to gather." The next step, he says, is the peer review day itself, "where we visit lessons, speak to staff and pupils, and gather our evidence," then three months later, staff receive a follow-up coaching session, to review the impact of the training and identify next steps.

Each school sets an inquiry question – "To what extent does...?" – which gives peer reviewers a clear focus. After the review, findings go to the improvement champions, who design a CPD session based on them for the rest of the staff.

"We're currently consulting on what good adaptation looks like, so that's the focus for this year," says Mark, "and another challenge is to make sure the framework and training remain fit for purpose."

A lot goes into this continuous professional development, but it does make larger changes easier on the Trust, Mark explains. "Because we have the framework, with agreed language and structure, things like the new curriculum review are smoother for us, because we relay them in previously agreed upon terms, so everyone's on the same page."

There's also a sense of support that comes with structured training, says Mark, and not only for the job day-to-day, but also for career progression. "I'm new to the role of teaching and learning lead, but I feel supported with the great training we get. Because it's cyclical and I can then pass it on to colleagues, it reinforces and solidifies what I've learned, which is really helpful, as then I know I'm fully equipped to do my job," he says.

Peer reviewers receive external training on an area the school would like to improve upon, or develop, such as oracy, then come back and deliver it to other teachers in their school. This allows each setting to get the most out of each external training session, and make sure all staff have equal access to knowledge.

The programme also includes every member of classroom staff, whether they're teachers, leaders or LSAs. "Everyone has a professional development pathway," says Koulla. But it's not one-size-fits all; each pathway is relevant to a particular role, and tailored to staff's particular desires for progression. "As an example," says Koulla, "we have a one-to-one SEND LSA who supports a child with visual impairment. She will receive a very different pathway from somebody who is a one-to-one SEND LSA for a pupil with ADHD. Some teachers are on the ECF, some are training to be peer reviewers or improvement champions, some are doing NPQs. There's a lot going on."

EVERYONE ON BOARD

Lakelands not only runs CPD for its staff, but is also involved in extra-curricular programmes to support pupils' wellbeing and personal development, such as OPAL (outdoor play and learning), and No Outsiders.

"The world we live in today can be pretty divided," says Laura Herbert, class teacher and lead of the No Outsiders programme at Lakelands. "We know that within society, people can find it difficult to communicate with each other, and that discrimination and racism are both unfortunately present."

The aim of No Outsiders, Laura says, is to "create an environment where children feel safe, where parents feel safe". The programme is built around picturebooks, and it teaches the premise that 'everyone is different, but all are equal'. "We teach key vocabulary," says Laura, "and we include some strategies for how to deal with things like racism".

But the approach isn't just academic. The principles of No Outsiders are very much woven into the fabric of the school, and Laura reports that they've seen positive changes in the playground. "We see pupils inviting those who are on their own into their groups to play," she says, "and they're using the vocabulary they've learned to be welcoming to their peers".

Ultimately, Laura says, it's about everybody being able to be themselves, whatever form that may take. "It goes back to empowerment," she says. "If we can all support each other, even in our differences, then school – and the world – will be a better place."

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Once training has been disseminated, a process of monitoring follows. For example, "on our next inset day, I'll be leading a session about questioning," explains Mark. "We'll then be able to monitor that across the school, looking at how it applies across the curriculum in all Key Stages." The monitoring process also allows teachers to make on-the-spot adjustments, adds Koulla, and because the structure has been clear from the start, teachers are receptive to feedback when peer reviewers do monitoring sessions in classrooms.

But does this classroom monitoring put children off? "Absolutely not," says Koulla, "again, because we've been able to mould the school from the ground up, we do one-to-one tours for prospective pupils and their families, which means we're in and out of classrooms all the time as the school has been building up its roll, so the children are used to seeing us, and don't blink an eye."

Onwards and upwards

But what about impact? What areas of improvement has Lakelands seen in the short time it's been open? Koulla explains that arithmetic has been a big focus, and that this has paid dividends across the school.

"We've worked really hard on arithmetic," she says, "we found that was something a lot of our children needed a bit of support with." But, she explains, when you start developing one skill, it does end up tying into the rest of the curriculum as well. "As the children are growing through the school, obviously their needs change," she explains, "so with the focus on arithmetic has come a development of multiplication and division skills. We've then moved on to mathematical thinking, and how we are getting the children to be able to reason and problem-solve, how they can use those skills not just as an extension task, but throughout their maths." And so it goes: mathematical thinking and problem-solving feed into vocabulary and sentence structure, respectful discussion and evidence-based explanation, all of which are essential skills across the curriculum.

All this supports overall curriculum design, too, as the school has an overview of all teaching across each year group, documenting how each unit links to others, and where callbacks are relevant. This is provided to teachers so that they can seamlessly weave in retrieval tasks – not only from the children's current year, but from across their schooling – to create strong knowledge links, bolstering the knowledge-led curriculum.

And again, there is CPD available to support teachers' own curriculum knowledge. "Every member of staff has a particular interest," says Koulla, "so we do what we can to allow them to follow those passions". Essentially, the aim is for all teachers at Lakelands to be a specialist in their chosen area – whether that's history or wellbeing – and give them the skills to pass their knowledge and passion on to others across the school, and in some cases, the Trust.

The iterative nature of the CPD cycle also allows teachers to benefit from the kind of teaching they give their pupils – as new research is done, and goals are developed, the framework is adapted. As the curriculum encourages retrieval and continuous development, so does the training and coaching for teachers. There's a community feel at Lakelands – all for one and one for all. There's an understanding amongst staff that they will support one another, and in turn benefit from that support themselves. "It's about empowering teachers," says Koulla, "then giving them the skills to empower others".

And isn't that what education's all about? **TP**

Meet the staff

LAURA HERBERT, CLASS TEACHER AND NO OUTSIDERS LEAD

"Being able to empower people to be confident is wonderful. And to see the positive effects of No Outsiders has been really lovely. But thanks to the training, I also have more confidence to openly have important conversations with members of our community."

MARK SHEAN, CLASS TEACHER AND TEACHING AND LEARNING LEAD

"Ordinary lesson observation can be really stressful, and it's easy to overprepare and then not run a lesson as you normally would. But peer review is more of a reflection of natural practice, than a performance."

DAISY STONE, LSA AND ELSA

"The CPD has been fantastic, because the leadership is so open to what interests you. Alongside my emotional literacy work, I'm really interested in drawing and talking. So SLT has put money aside for me to go on a course."

DANIELLE LLEWELLYN, ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER AND OPAL LEAD

"We used to have quite a few problems at playtime and lunchtime, but since starting the OPAL programme, we've had barely any issues. We really value play at Lakelands, so it works well for us."

How I do it

Show children in real-time how our perception can be so easily altered, while exploring refraction and magnification for your light unit

DR SAI PATHMANATHAN

Science isn't just about big explosions and huge chemical reactions. With a few pieces of simple equipment, the science can be just as impressive – if not more so – because children get to do it themselves and see the applications and how these activities connect to their daily lives. Children enjoy creating individual experiments on a small scale, for them to take ownership of and observe. The excitement of seeing a reaction happen in their jar, that they've created, will be enough for children to start thinking like a scientist and wanting to investigate further.

In this activity, pupils will learn about refraction and reflection, and how they're different. You'll need: glass jars with lids, water, pencils, pieces of paper or card, and a mirror.

1

Start by asking children what they see when they look into a mirror. They might answer that they see themselves, or their faces, and you can then introduce the word *reflection*, and explain that a reflection is created when light reflects on the mirror's surface, and back into the eyes. Even though we see a 'mirror image' (as if we have been flipped sideways, known as *lateral inversion*), the mirror actually reflects exactly what is in front of it. For example, our left arm will be seen on the left side of the mirror.

2

Next, ask children to predict what they might see when a pencil is placed into water. Demonstrate this, by adding a pencil into a jar half-filled with water. Pupils may report that the pencil looks bent, or broken. Explain that this is due to *refraction*, which is when light bends as it passes between different media and materials (in this case, air and water), as light moves at different speeds through these media.

3

Now ask children to draw a horizontal arrow on a piece of card using the pencil, and then to fill a jar with water so that it is up to the top (slightly overflowing), and to close the lid. This ensures that there will be no air bubbles in the jar. Ask them to place the arrow card directly behind the jar, so that they can view it through the jar and water. They then need to slowly move the arrow card further away, while still looking through the jar. What can they see happening? Pupils should report that the arrow has 'magically' changed direction!

4

Explain that this is because the jar of water is acting like a magnifying glass, which refracts light because of the curve of its glass – a *convex lens*, the surfaces of which curve outwards (the opposite – concave lenses – curve inwards). The lens (or jar of water in this case) bends the light to a focal point. As the light rays continue beyond the focal point, the image seems to reverse (the light rays that were on one side are now on the other). We see this as a flipped arrow.

5

Finally, ask children to hold a pencil about 30 centimetres behind the jar, and look through the front of the jar. What can they see? Pupils might report that they see two pencils. You can explain that this is because the jar is still acting as a magnifying glass, but is a cylinder, so both sides are curving, and both eyes are looking through the jar at different angles, at the same pencil. Ask children to close one eye. What do they see now? They should only see one pencil again.

Dr Sai Pathmanathan has over 20 years of experience in science education. You can find lots of other science experiments in her book, **Utterly Jarvellous: 50 primary science activities you can do in a jar** *(£24.99, Bloomsbury).*

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Putting the 'co' back in COLLABORATIVE TEACHING

Weak structures quietly undermine teacher wellbeing, retention and inclusive practice – so how can schools adjust before burnout sets in?

DR ALEXIS HAMLOR

By the end of a collaborative lesson, both teachers feel exhausted – but for different reasons. One has led instruction while managing behaviour, pacing and whole-class demands alone. The other has spent the hour adapting materials, supporting individual pupils, tracking adjustments and quietly absorbing responsibility for students who are struggling. There was no time to plan together beforehand, and there won't be time to debrief afterwards.

Nothing has gone wrong. And yet, both teachers leave knowing the workload is unsustainable – and that tomorrow will look much the same.

This is how 'collaborative teaching' can begin to undermine wellbeing and retention: not through conflict or incompetence, but through weak structures that turn shared work into parallel strain.

Slowly losing the 'co'

In classrooms where collaboration is under-structured, the same dynamic develops quietly and repeatedly. One teacher becomes the visible instructional lead, carrying pacing, behaviour and whole-class responsibility. The other becomes the problem-solver in the background – adapting materials, supporting individual pupils, monitoring adjustments and filling gaps no-one has formally named. Planning happens when it can. Roles flex constantly, but without agreement.

At first, this feels manageable. Over time, it becomes exhausting.

Collaborative teaching rarely collapses all at once. It erodes through accumulation – extra decisions, invisible labour and responsibility that gradually concentrates in one role. Responsibility for pupils with additional needs often informally shifts to one adult, without a corresponding adjustment to workload or expectations. This is where teacher wellbeing begins to fray, and where retention risk quietly grows.

The tipping point

As collaborative structures weaken, workload doesn't just increase, it becomes unpredictable. Teachers are expected to be flexible without clarity, accountable without authority and collaborative without time. Specialist staff often absorb coordination and compliance demands, while classroom teachers feel exposed and unsupported.

Over time, a set of unspoken questions emerges:

- Who is ultimately responsible if support is inconsistent?
- Who carries the risk if progress stalls?
- Is this role sustainable year after year?

These questions are rarely raised in meetings, but they drive decisions about staying or leaving. When teachers step away from collaborative roles, it is often framed as burnout or personal preference. In reality, attrition is frequently the downstream effect of weak systems. Goodwill can keep collaboration afloat temporarily, but robust structure is what makes it survivable.

When encouragement won't fix it

When collaborative teaching starts to strain, schools often respond with encouragement: communicate more, be

"Collaborative teaching rarely collapses all at once; but gradulally erodes through accumulation of extra labour"

flexible, work it out together. Whilst well-intentioned, this approach places further pressure on staff. Flexibility without structure increases risk. Collaborative teaching only works when certain conditions are deliberately designed and protected:

- Time that is genuinely safeguarded
- Roles that are explicit rather than assumed
- Accountability that is shared rather than absorbed
- Leadership oversight that supports alignment, not compliance

Without these conditions, collaboration relies on individual resilience… and resilience eventually runs out. This is not a classroom-level issue. It is a systems and leadership responsibility with direct implications for wellbeing, retention, and inclusive practice.

The impact on pupils

Pupils feel the effects of weak collaborative structures long before adults name them. Support may exist, but inconsistently. Expectations may be clear in one lesson and unclear in the next. Relationships may form, but without continuity. For pupils with additional needs, this unpredictability undermines confidence and trust. Inclusive practice depends on reliability. Reliability depends on structure.

When collaboration lacks coherence, pupils experience support as fragile, even when adults are trying their best.

A practical reset

So, how can we right this? You don't need a new framework or a lengthy rollout to get started; all you need is a short, repeatable reset that restores clarity, rebalances responsibility and protects staff before strain turns into attrition.

The One-Week Collaborative Teaching Reset is designed to be used at any point in the year, and revisited whenever collaboration begins to drift. This is what it looks like:

Day 1: Make roles explicit

- Clarify who leads instruction, who supports and when roles flex.
- Agree responsibilities for behaviour, assessment and adaptations.
- Make expectations visible to both teachers.

Day 2: Reclaim planning

- Protect a short, focused planning conversation.
- Plan instruction first, then embed accommodations.
- Identify where support should be proactive, not reactive.

Day 3: Share accountability

- Clarify responsibility for pupil progress and documentation.
- Identify where workload has informally shifted to one person.
- Adjust expectations to rebalance responsibility.

Day 4: Check sustainability

- Name what feels manageable – and what doesn't.
- Identify one pressure point that increases strain unnecessarily.
- Agree one immediate adjustment to reduce load.

Day 5: Lock it in

- Agree what must stay protected moving forward.
- Set a date to revisit roles and planning.
- Name one early indicator that collaboration is drifting again.

This reset isn't about perfection, but about preventing erosion. Collaborative teaching should reduce isolation, not just redistribute it. When schools invest in clarity, protected time and shared responsibility, collaboration becomes a sustainable, inclusive practice that supports pupils and the professionals who teach them.

Without those structures, even the most committed staff will eventually choose self-preservation over perseverance. TP

Dr. Alexis L. Hamlor is a scholar-practitioner, former dean of special education, and teacher.

tinyurl.com/tp-AHsubstack

Q&A

A breath of fresh air

Ethan Morris, education technical sales executive at Fordingbridge, discusses the importance of outdoor spaces for schools, and how to keep them on top form...

30 SECOND BRIEFING

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

Why incorporate covered outdoor learning areas into your environment?

In primary schools, every square metre counts. Covered outdoor spaces help transform areas like courtyards or areas outside classrooms – that often sit unused for much of the year – into valuable new spaces where pupils can learn, create, play and socialise year-round.

How do all-weather areas support learning?

Their flexibility is what makes these attractive spaces so valuable. Under a canopy, pupils can settle into a quiet reading corner, work in small groups on a challenge, or carry out hands-on experiments that demand more space than is available in a busy classroom setting. These outdoor areas are also perfect for messy arts and crafts activities.

What other benefits does outdoor learning unlock?

The schools we've worked with tell us that the outdoor learning spaces we create transform school life. Just stepping outside can make all the difference! Fresh air and a change of scenery help pupils reset and refocus. Outdoor spaces also create calmer environments for quieter reflection or focused groupwork, so have an important role to play in supporting wellbeing and concentration.

What design ideas help these spaces work best for primary schools?

Think multi-purpose. Simple features like picnic bench seating allow these areas to be used for learning, dining, social time or after-school clubs. Materials and finishes can be chosen to complement the school environment – we can even match the colour of the structure to the school's brand colours. Light-diffusing roofing is essential to keep these spaces bright, and decoration like bunting, wall murals and children's art really bring these areas to life.

ABOUT ETHAN:
Ethan Morris is an education technical sales executive at Fordingbridge.

Contact:
fordingbridge.co.uk | info@fordingbridge.co.uk | 01243 55 44 55

What else should schools consider when planning an outdoor space?

Remember to think about all seasons! In our wet, often cold climate, the focus is naturally on how to shelter outdoor spaces from wind and rain. But it's also important to make outdoor learning areas comfortable and usable in the summer too. Our unique Opal 60 roofing creates inviting light areas, while screening out harmful UV rays to create environments that work even on the hottest, brightest days.

What's the difference?

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

THIS WAY!

School improvement advice for headteachers and SLT

MIDDLE LEADERS | CPD | SUBJECT LEADERSHIP

What the new ESTATES STRATEGY *means for you*

School buildings play a central role in children's learning, wellbeing and safety. Yet much of the UK's education estate is ageing, inefficient and increasingly exposed to climate pressures such as overheating or flooding. For years, voices across the country – from the Let's Go Zero campaign, to the youth-led Teach the Future movement – have been calling for substantial investment to tackle crumbling buildings and ensure classrooms remain safe and productive.

Against this backdrop, the Department for Education recently published the Education Estates Strategy: the government's long-term vision for modernising school buildings so that they are more resilient, efficient and sustainable (see it at **tinyurl.com/tp-Estates26**). While the strategy acknowledges the scale of the challenge facing schools, it also offers something the sector has been missing for some time: a clearer direction of travel.

I regularly hear from primary schools who have long been saying what the strategy now recognises: buildings are not simply a facilities issue. Their condition and design are closely tied to pupil outcomes, staff wellbeing and the long-term sustainability of the sector. For that reason, whilst the strategy has significant implications for those responsible for managing school estates, its implications will be felt by everyone who works or learns in a primary school building.

Alongside making sure buildings are 'safe', 'suitable' and 'sufficiently sized', sustainability is listed as a key priority objective for estates management. Raising the bar significantly, estates are to be designed with 'nature and climate in mind'. What this actually means, is that both new and existing schools will be designed, or adapted, to be energy efficient, low-carbon and as green as possible.

From expectation to support

The Education Estates Strategy does a good job at setting an admittedly ambitious national direction, but what does this mean for your school?

The strategy commits to supporting all settings to develop climate action plans and appointing a sustainability lead – two things the DfE already expects all settings to have in place. This shift from expectation to proactive support is an important one.

Without a climate action plan, Dawn Houldershaw, the academy operations manager at King Edward VI Academy in Lincolnshire, was hesitant about taking on climate action, and was pessimistic about what the school could realistically achieve. Within a year of implementing a plan created with their Climate Action Advisor, they managed to reduce their carbon emissions by 43 tonnes CO_2 – bringing down their monthly energy costs significantly just through improved monitoring and tweaking their Building Management Systems settings. In addition, they accessed £12,000 in funding from the National Education Nature Park, which was used to install a natural pond on site, an orangery, vegetable planters and even beehives.

Funding: the crucial piece of the puzzle

Schools like King Edward VI Academy demonstrate how even relatively small interventions can make a difference over time, particularly when they form part of a clear and well-planned strategy. But ambition alone will not modernise the school estate; funding will be key.

Thankfully, this is one of the strongest aspects of the strategy. The Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson MP, has promised to "turn the page on years of neglect", announcing an investment in education capital of £38 billion for 2025-26 to 2029-30 – the highest since 2010.

A new Renewal and Retrofit programme will ringfence £710 million for projects that fall between routine maintenance and full rebuilding. This could include replacing ageing roofs, improving heating systems or addressing insulation and draught issues.

A fundamental part of education

Buildings and estates can be a more challenging area for schools and Trusts than it needs to be. There can be confusion about roles, fear of contractors, outdated processes and a lack of clear contractor management policies. These issues could become a real hurdle if your school is joining a Trust or if you are expanding your existing MAT – which of course is now a consideration for every school, and many leaders, following the 2026 Schools White Paper's commitment that every school in England must belong to a Trust.

Strong, clearcut due diligence gives Trusts the clarity to grow safely and sustainably – and helps schools enter a MAT with a full understanding of their estate, responsibilities and risks.

The aim isn't to generate paperwork or compliance for its own sake. It's about protecting the buildings that house children, staff and the wider community. And being unafraid to challenge and ask questions, learn and be proactive is a vital part of the process.

Here are some key areas to think about:

1 It's not about technical expertise

Many schools or MATs believe they cannot effectively oversee estates because they aren't electricians or fire experts. But they don't need to be experts – they just need to effectively *manage* experts.

Due diligence should test if the school or Trust:

- Understands its management duty to appoint competent contractors
- Has a reliable system for verifying qualifications and evidence
- Knows how to ask the right questions
- Records decisions, checks and follow-up actions

2 Do you have an effective framework?

Many schools and Trusts inherit processes or use generic templates. The lack of a clear management framework can complicate tasks and create multiple risks.

Check:

- How estates tasks are planned, communicated and monitored
- Whether responsibilities are clearly delegated and understood
- Whether systems are proactive or simply reactive
- How information flows between leaders, site staff, business managers and contractors
- Whether building safety management is joined up and linked with your risk register

3 What's the culture?

A school or trust may have templates and policies, but that doesn't mean they understand or follow them.

Ask:

- Are staff curious and willing to ask questions and escalate issues when needed?
- Do they challenge contractors when things don't seem right?
- Are they open to adopting Trust-wide systems?
- Do they understand the importance of protecting, maintaining and investing in buildings?

4 Are you working from up-to-date legislation?

Schools cannot manage what they don't understand, and trusts cannot inherit risks they do not know exist.

Check:

- Fire safety management against current FRA expectations
- Asbestos management against current requirements
- Compliance schedules (water hygiene, gas or electrics, for example) are in line with the premises' specific requirements
- Awareness of updates to building, fire and safety regulations

Isthar Pearce is head of health, safety and fire safety at Judicium.

judiciumeducation.co.uk/health-and-safety

"Even relatively small interventions can make a difference over time"

The Condition Improvement Fund (CIF), which many schools found time-intensive and highly competitive, will also be phased out. If a new approach simplifies access to funding while increasing overall investment, it could make a significant difference for responsible bodies managing school estates.

Exactly how new funding programmes will work in practice remains to be seen, but any move that streamlines funding while supporting climate resilience will be widely welcomed.

Unlocking private finance

Alongside public investment, the strategy also highlights the role of private finance in accelerating large-scale improvements.

For several years, Let's Go Zero has been calling for clearer guidance on, and fewer barriers to, repayable finance – particularly for projects such as solar panels, which can deliver long-term savings.

This builds on progress already made by the Great British Energy Solar Programme, which will install solar panels at just over 250 schools across the country, saving participating settings thousands of pounds per year on their bills. However, with more than 22,000 schools and colleges across the UK, scaling this progress will require clearer procurement routes and approved financing models if we are to decarbonise the whole school estate.

Encouragingly, the estates strategy recognises this, noting the DfE is 'working to unlock privately financed investment'. The real test will be delivery, but it's positive to see the DfE signal support for approving Power Purchase Agreements – streamlining the process and removing the burden on school leaders to navigate complex solar funding options themselves.

The estate of the future

Looking ahead, the Education Estates Strategy signals a shift towards a more joined-up approach to managing school buildings.

Rather than focusing solely on short-term repairs or isolated projects, the aim is to take a longer-term view that considers the overall condition of the estate, the need to adapt to climate risks and the importance of reducing emissions.

The growing number of schools taking part in initiatives such as Let's Go Zero shows that many settings are already keen to take practical steps. With the right support and investment, the new estates strategy could help accelerate this progress across the education sector.

Alex Green is head of Let's Go Zero.

letsgozero.org

The state of the nation: MAT finances

Despite much belt-tightening and the somewhat unexpected injections of finance from government, there is no doubt that multi-academy trust finances remain under significant strain. This is having direct consequences for the upkeep, safety, and long-term resilience of school buildings and facilities in particular.

The Kreston UK Academies Benchmark Report shows Trusts recorded their strongest financial performance in three years, with only 37 per cent reporting an in-year deficit in 2024/25, compared with 60 per cent the previous year. However, this improvement is largely attributed to tight cost control rather than any easing of underlying financial pressures. Trust reserves are forecast to fall sharply over the next two years, which will limit Trusts' ability to take a strategic approach to estate management, forcing many to prioritise emergency works over planned maintenance.

Compounding these pressures is what many sector leaders refer to as the 'CIF funding lottery'. The Condition Improvement Fund (CIF) is available to smaller Trusts that don't benefit from School Condition Allocation funding. The funding remains highly competitive, with only 28 per cent of bids successful in the 2025–26 round.

CIF outcomes also show geographical variation, with regional outcome data published by the DfE indicating uneven success rates. This unevenness can leave schools in certain regions disproportionately reliant on unpredictable capital outcomes, hindering long-term estate planning.
This means that Trusts, particularly smaller ones with limited surpluses, struggle to finance major capital works such as roofing, safeguarding upgrades, heating systems and lifecycle replacements. The new DfE Education Estates Strategy a significant opportunity, but its success will depend on creating a more stable funding environment for trusts of all sizes so all regions, schools and pupils benefit. Watch this space...

Kevin Connor is head of academies at accountants, Bishop Fleming.

bishopfleming.co.uk

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London Symphony Orchestra

Contact:
Find the resources at lso.co.uk/planets

At a glance

+ Free Key Stage 2 digital resources exploring *The Planets* through music, space and cross-curricular learning.
+ Engaging video activities, ready-to-use lesson plans and a quiz designed for flexible classroom delivery.
+ Supports creativity, listening skills and critical thinking while introducing students to orchestral music.

How to spot DYSCALCULIA

Are pupils' maths difficulties just misconceptions, or indications of something more? Use a checklist to put your mind at rest, say **Jane Emerson** and **Robert Jennings**

For most children, the first step in identifying a potential problem with maths is that their rate of progress is slower than their peers. This may be something pupils themselves pick up on through their observation of others and their perception that they perform poorly in classroom tasks or in tests.

In most cases, educators and parents are alerted to issues when they compare maths performance with that in other subjects, where the child may be progressing with more ease and understanding. When that contrast in performance is coupled with the persistence of difficulties in maths, the first suspicions of significant maths learning difficulties arise.

These events often lead to parents or educators wanting more evidence of specific issues with maths or where maths difficulties are occurring. This is where the use of a checklist comes in. A 'key indicators' checklist will help in the process of gathering information on the student to identify key areas in which they may be struggling that could lead to an indication of maths difficulties or whether further investigation or intervention might be needed.

These checklists are generally easy to use and are not time-consuming.

The key indicators of a potential problem include:

- an inability to subitise very small quantities without counting them
- poor number sense – struggling to estimate or follow patterns
- immature strategies – e.g. reliance on counting in ones
- slow processing speed
- lack of understanding of place value and basic number system
- reversing digits and errors writing numbers (18 is written as 80 or 23 as 32)
- inability to recognise if an answer is reasonable, and making inaccurate estimations
- weak at making connections – for example, 4 + 4 = 8, therefore 14 + 4 = 18
- problems with all aspects of money and time – for example, unable to read the time on an analogue clock or understanding the relative value of coins, such as a small 20p coin which has more value than a larger 10p coin
- poor memory for facts and procedures
- maths language confusion – for example, misunderstanding that the 'difference between' two numbers is in fact a subtraction term
- difficulties in word problems and multi-step calculations
- counting errors (70, 80, 90, 20) and an inability to count backwards.

Note, this is not an exhaustive list of indicators but does include all the key areas to look out for.

"A 'key indicators' checklist will help you gather the necessary information"

How can I tell?

There are a number of free checklists available, which list indicators of dyscalculia and maths difficulties, such as:

- Ann Abor Publishers provide a list of possible symptoms of dyscalculia at **tinyurl.com/tp-AAdyscalculia**
- Steve Chinn has a dyscalculia checklist – also provided in his book *More Trouble with Maths*, 3rd edition (2023) – available at **tinyurl.com/tp-SCdyscalculia**

There are no overall scores or grades for this list. Obviously, the more behaviours that are present, the more severe the learning difficulties will be. Each indicator is ranked between 1 and 5 so that you can ascertain which are the more serious concerns.

There is an additional dyscalculia and maths difficulties checklist provided by kind permission of the Dyscalculia Network (see it at

dyscalculianetwork.com), which you can download at the link, or by scanning the QR code, in the panel at the end of this article.

The checklist has been designed to be used by both educators and parents. It is a simple and easy-to-use form, which provides a snapshot of all the key indicators of dyscalculia and maths difficulties, and presents the information in a very visual 'traffic light' format. Red indicates that the behaviour is often viewed, orange occasionally, and green not at all.

If a person gets mostly green with a few orange/red, it would be advisable to note the areas they are finding more challenging and create an intervention programme to target these areas.

The use of a checklist provides an opportunity for a parent or educator to start gathering information on the student's maths ability. It will provide a snapshot of whether the student is demonstrating indicators of maths difficulties always, sometimes or not at all. It does not give any qualitative information on each item, just whether it is present or not.

It is important to remember that checklists like these are not formal assessment tools, but they do provide a helpful first step in the gathering of information on a pupil who you believe may have persistent maths difficulties, and this can help you decide if a more formal assessment or screening should be sought.

What next?

A maths screener assessment may be the next step after the informal recognition of maths difficulties. A screener is a quick and relatively low-cost option, which can be used easily with a large number of children to identify who may be struggling with the maths learning. They are generally open tests (see definitions below), which can be administered by both specialist and non-specialist educators. However, people who are experienced with working with pupils who have low ability in maths may be more able to get the best use out of them and identify more qualitative information – such as how calculations have been solved – by analysing the nature of the errors made.

Open tests are assessments that have no restrictions on their use. They can be employed by teachers, teaching assistants, SENCOs or a parent of a child whose abilities need investigating. It should be noted that even though they are open, the test results and analysis are improved with relevant experience in teaching maths.

Closed tests can onlybe used by the appropriately trained and qualified professional.

Screeners provide a limited amount of information, and should flag up a potential problem, but will not offer recommendations on addressing the problem. They provide information on the individual and should not be used as a diagnosis.

There are a number of examples available in the marketplace, such as from GL Assessment, Dynamo Maths, More Trouble with Maths, and IDL.

For more information, see our book, *The Maths and Dyscalculia Assessment*, which offers more strategies for recognising and supporting dyscalculia. **TP**

"A maths screener assessment may be the next step"

DOWNLOAD RESOURCES AT

teachwire

Download your **FREE** dyscalculia checklist at

tinyurl.com/DyscalChecklist

or by scanning the QR code.

The Maths and Dyscalculia Assessment by Jane Emerson and Robert Jennings (£49.99, Jessica Kingsley Publishers), is out now. Get 20% off – exclusive for Teach Primary readers – at uk.jkp.com when you use the code PRIMARYMATHS20

Space for COMPLEXITY

Celebrating mixed heritage in our classrooms can help make all pupils feel safe and welcome, and improve learning outcomes, says **Emma Slade Edmondson**

For as long as I can remember, people have tried to define me – to fold me neatly into a box that made sense to them, something they could quickly label, understand and file away. From the forms wielded at school and in doctors' surgeries, demanding a decision and definitive tick, to the inquisitive and sometimes pervasively persistent questions, I recall being asked to declare who I am from an early age.

Not too long ago, to help me write something I was working on, my northern grandma recounted how she was often asked when I was very small, at larger gatherings and family affairs, if I was, 'perhaps... adopted'; a question I often fielded from school mates myself.

Spoiler alert: I am not adopted – I am mixed-race, mixed Jamaican and white British – but when people saw me with my mum and dad, they could not hide their confusion.

Growing up mixed heritage in a world that prefers tidy categories can feel like being gently squeezed into shapes that don't quite fit. It took me till my 30s, when I began finding and interviewing other mixed-race people about their own experiences through my podcast *Mixed Up* **(tinyurl.com/tp-MixedUpPod)**, to understand something I wish I'd known in primary school: belonging isn't a destination. It's a journey. And that journey becomes far easier when you are supported with space to explore your whole story.

Primary teachers are often the first professionals to shape how children understand identity. When mixed-heritage pupils feel repeatedly questioned, misidentified or simplified, those moments stick. They accumulate quietly.

"Growing up mixed heritage in a world that prefers tidy categories can feel like being squeezed into shapes that don't fit"

By the time children reach Key Stage 2, they are already acutely aware of difference. They notice skin tone. They compare hair. They listen for accents. They use race as one of the factors to categorise and decide who to include and who to exclude. Mixed-heritage children often experience:

- being told what they "look like"
- having their attributes and likes and dislikes linked to stereotypes
- being asked to explain their family structure
- feeling 'too much' of one thing and 'not enough' of another
- being misidentified
- being asked to justify or explain how they can belong to two cultures.

These experiences can be subtle, everyday moments. Over time, they can chip away at a child's sense of self. So, what can we do to make sure that all our pupils, from all backgrounds, are made to feel safe and at home in our classrooms?

Ready-to-use activities

1. The identity jar (ages: 5–7)
Ask children to place anonymous identity words (e.g. sister, footballer, bilingual, Jamaican, shy, Muslim, Greek) into a jar. Take turns to pull them out one by one and discuss, as a class or in groups, how one person can hold many different identities at once.

2. Heritage recipe cards (ages: 7–11)
Part a) Invite families to share a simple recipe connected to their background. Compile all the recipes into a class cookbook celebrating blended traditions. You can have children illustrate the pages with pictures of the meal or ingredients – either from their own backgrounds, or swapping recipes and illustrating each other's pages.
Part b) Help children design a recipe that combines ingredients from their different cultures or heritage groups. You can either make one class recipe, or if there are a lot of different cultures in your class, you can split pupils up into groups.

3. 'Map of me' wall display
Ask each pupil to pop a pin to signify places important to their family on a world map. You can use string to show multiple connections from one child.

4. Assembly theme idea
Why not design an assembly around the concept of 'whole, not half'? You can explore how mixtures (colours, musical notes, ingredients) create something new and complete.

5. Further reading
Texts can be a really valuable support tool when talking about identity, whether you're sharing them with children, or doing a bit of background research. Here are some titles:

- *MIXED: Explore and Celebrate Your Mixed Identity*, by Emma Slade Edmondson (me!)
- Poetry collections by Dean Atta. See his LoveReading page at **tinyurl.com/tp-LRDeanAtta**
- Interviews with Ashleigh Plumptre on dual heritage in sport, such as this one from the *Guardian*: **tinyurl.com/tp-APlumptre**

"From forms in doctors' offices and at school, demanding a definitive tick, to pervasively persistent questions, I recall being asked to declare who I am from an early age"

It's not about perfection

You don't need perfect language. You don't need to be an expert in race theory to support mixed- heritage pupils. You just need to open and dedicated to fostering curiosity, humility and respect.

Children notice who gets asked to explain themselves. They notice who is repeatedly categorised. They also notice when adults gently challenge assumptions and make room for nuance. Some days, a mixed-heritage child will feel they belong everywhere. Other days, nowhere. Your classroom can become the steady foundation and safe space for that journey with identity.

When you create space for complexity, you don't just support mixed-heritage pupils. You teach every child that giving grace and space to others' identity is crucial and rewarding for everyone involved. TP

Emma Slade Edmondson is a podcaster and writer. Her latest book, **Mixed: Explore and Celebrate Your Mixed Identity** *(£9.99, Macmillan Children's Books), is available now.*

@mixedup.podcast

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INSIDE THIS SECTION

SIP THE BEAT

Take a trip to the Rhythm Café and help your pupils shimmy, shake and score their way into understanding

ASHLEY BETTS

Using words – and drinks, specifically – to introduce rhythmic concepts has long been a favourite trick of music teachers. Even if you haven't experienced this yourself, I'm pretty sure that if I show you the phrase "tea, coffee, coca-cola, tea" you could hear it in your head, and probably clap it accurately. You would actually be clapping the simple four-beat rhythm: crotchet, pair of quavers, four semiquavers, crotchet – but I bet that set of words wouldn't elicit the same musical response!

There are endless variations to this. I've heard of *cappuccino* as a substitute for *coca-cola*, seen fruity twists along the lines of *grape, mango, watermelon, grape,* and even likened the rhythms to creepy-crawlies: *bee, spider, caterpillar, bee*. They are used in classrooms all over the world and with good reason – they work! And they work especially well for our primary-aged learners, as they can develop musical language alongside their other evolving language skills.

Understanding the merits of these three drinks as an introduction, I wanted a model that would build on those strong foundations for further rhythmic exploration. To achieve this, I developed a menu. Actually, I developed a set of five menus, gradually building from the three initial drinks to a multi-faceted rhythm model.

Can I see a menu?

Menu one introduces not just the three drinks, but a hugely important part of the whole model: 'all drinks one beat'. This phrase becomes a powerful tool for discussing the difference between 'beats' and 'notes'.

A common misconception is that *coffee* (or a pair of quavers) is two beats. Using the menu, this can be addressed very simply with the question "is *coffee* a drink?" If all drinks are one beat, and *coffee* is a drink, then *coffee* must be one beat. What are there two of? Notes.

"I wanted a model that would build on strong foundations for further rhythmic exploration"

I like to introduce menu one with a bit of imagination and roleplay. I start by showing pictures of the actual drinks. I ask the children to imagine waking up in the morning to a cup of tea by their bed. If they drank the whole cup, they would likely have a burst of energy. I roleplay this scenario and bound out of bed with a single clap, ready to face the day. I then ask the children to reimagine the scenario with a cup of coffee. I explain that coffee gives us more energy, as it contains more caffeine, then roleplay getting out of bed, this time more energetically and with a double clap. Finally, we imagine downing a can of coca-cola, (which contains caffeine *and* sugar). I dramatically jump out bed, perform four quicker claps and run across the room screaming. When we have all calmed down, I explain that these drink-induced increases in energy will all last the same amount of **time**, but coca-cola would give me **more** energy than tea. Coca-cola gives **more** in the same **time**.

Menu two contains no new drinks, but adds the marketing strapline *drinks to make you go ooh, ahh*, introducing a single minim and a single semibreve. It's important that these rhythms are not given drink names, as all drinks are one beat. Moreover, *ooh* (which lasts two beats) rhymes with the number *two*.

Menu three adds another marketing strapline, *come and have a rest*, alongside a crotchet rest symbol.

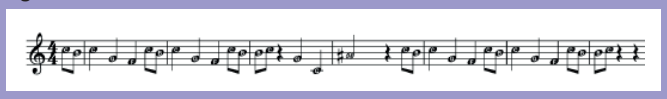
Menu four adds the 'speciality coffees' to the menu. *Latte* and *mocha* are both types of coffee: they have two notes in one beat, but they are both fancier than a standard coffee. Both contain a longer note and a shorter note, which matches the *ah* syllable in the words: *latte* = long-short, *mocha* = short-long. The final menu adds three more drinks. Each of these drinks contains three notes in a single beat. *Lime soda, lemonade* and *peach iced tea*.

Ready to order?

So how are the menus used? When introducing new rhythms, we start with teacher modelling using 'I do, we do, you do'. We then practise performing the rhythms independently with some café roleplay. Take this as far as you like, but I have a table set up in the corner of my room with a musical tablecloth and the menu on the wall. Pupils are selected to work a 'shift' in the café by putting on the 'uniform' (a musical apron) and taking my order. I ask for four drinks (modelling how the rhythms should sound in how I pronounce them) and the children 'serve' the drinks by clapping the rhythm. If they get my order correct, they earn a 'tip' in the form of a high five or a sticker, and if they need some support, the rest of the class join in with some 'staff training' where we repeat the modelling process. The children then complete the same roleplay in pairs, swapping roles of 'customer' and 'server'.

Once children are sufficiently trained in a menu, we use it to interpret many rhythms, before composing our own. The website **rhythmrandomizer.com** is great for generating stage-appropriate rhythms.

Fig.1



It allows you to select which rhythms you are focusing on, as well as how many bars you want and a few other settings. When composing, children can copy from the menu and use the drinks as building blocks.

From cafe to cinema

A strong understanding of rhythm notation plays a huge part when decoding a written melody. Take this extract from John Williams' *Jurassic Park Theme* (*Fig.1*):

We prepare to play this melody by doing the following before even getting the instruments out:

1. Read the rhythm of this melody, using Rhythm Café names: "*coffee tea tea tea coffee tea tea tea coffee coffee* (rest) *tea tea ooh* (rest)..."
2. Repeat and clap along with the names.
3. Clap without saying the names.
4. Say the pitch names to the rhythm "C B C G F, C B C G F..."
5. Sing the pitch names to the rhythm.

Starting with our understanding of rhythm notation and building up slowly to singing, pupils have clear knowledge of what the melody needs to sound like by the time they are expected to perform it. Of course, this café model doesn't cover every rhythm a musician might face, but it introduces many of the concepts they can build on over time, including dotted rhythms, triplets and how shorter notes have more connecting lines. Exposing children to as much notation as possible, using the menu as a tool, gives them a phrase book for a language they are just starting to learn – and the exciting potential for fluency. TP

Ashley Betts is a primary music specialist, and former secondary teacher.

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Shared LANGUAGE

Using music to help pupils understand and express feelings can bring calmness and creativity to your classroom, says **Rachel Hawker**

Like many people reading this, I've always found comfort in music – a place where I can truly be myself. Whatever was happening in my life, there was always a song or piece of music I could connect with in that moment.

Music gives children a space to express themselves and process feelings in a way few other subjects allow. It's why it plays such an essential role in learning and is increasingly recognised as far more than a 'nice to have'. At their best, music lessons offer a nurturing environment where fun, progress and holistic outcomes work in unison.

And when pupils make music together, this deepens. Social barriers soften, and the focus shifts from getting the 'right' answer, to shared creativity and emotional connection. It's often where we see children who may struggle elsewhere in the curriculum come to life.

Music naturally supports emotional literacy: rhythm and tempo help regulate the nervous system, while harmony and melody bypass language and speak directly to emotion. This gives children a way to express feelings they might not yet have words for.

In a group setting, pupils experience autonomy and choice – including that wonderful permission to say they don't like something. "I don't like that music" becomes a meaningful act of self-expression and makes them consider *why* they don't like it.

Making music together is predictable enough to be

calming, yet flexible enough to be personalised. It's non-judgemental and validating, giving children space to make mistakes safely and see them as steps towards progress.

So how can we translate this into the practical realities of a group music lesson?

Soundscapes

Soundscapes are a simple way to help children regulate and express emotion through music – without needing instruments. I first used this with a particularly lively Year 6 class when I was a stand-in music teacher. To channel their Friday afternoon energy, I showed a video of a choir creating a rainforest soundscape (like this one: **tinyurl.com/tp-RainChoir)** before performing 'Africa' by Toto. We recreated the atmospheric rainfall and thunder using only body percussion. It immediately set a calm tone across the class – and really resonated with the pupils.

Over the following weeks, we worked together as a group to create soundscapes for places like the seaside or a funfair. One child also suggested we create "happy and sad sounds", which tied perfectly to our work on major and minor chords.

What makes soundscapes powerful is their flexibility. Once children grasp the idea, the group dynamic encourages ownership, experimentation and collective emotional expression.

Check-in circle

A musical check-in circle offers a gentle, safe way for pupils to communicate how they're feeling at the start of a lesson. It's especially effective in specialist settings, but also works well in mainstream classrooms.

Set up a circle of instruments and invite children to sit at the one that appeals to them that day. Guide a short check-in where pupils play a rhythm or sound representing how they feel. A calm child may play slowly; an excited child might tap quickly. Some may even choose silence. There are no wrong answers, and hearing these responses as a group helps children understand one another without needing verbal explanation.

This gives you a clear sense of where everyone is as the lesson begins, while giving pupils a creative, pressure-free outlet rooted in shared music-making.

Visualising sound

Inviting children to visualise what they hear is an intuitive way to develop musical understanding and emotional awareness.

Play a short piece of atmospheric music and ask pupils to lie or sit down, close their eyes and listen. Encourage them to imagine a picture or music video in their minds, then share with the group, noticing similarities and differences.

What's remarkable is how naturally this builds musical vocabulary. When asked "Why do you think you imagined that?", pupils begin linking their ideas and feelings to musical features: dancing flutes that sound magical, or low and slow strings that feel tense. Not only can they start to tell you how the music is making them feel, but they can tell you why. Over time, these shared reflections strengthen understanding of key musical concepts and encourage attentive listening – a core part of the curriculum. **TP**

Rachel Hawker is chief of education at Rocksteady Music School.

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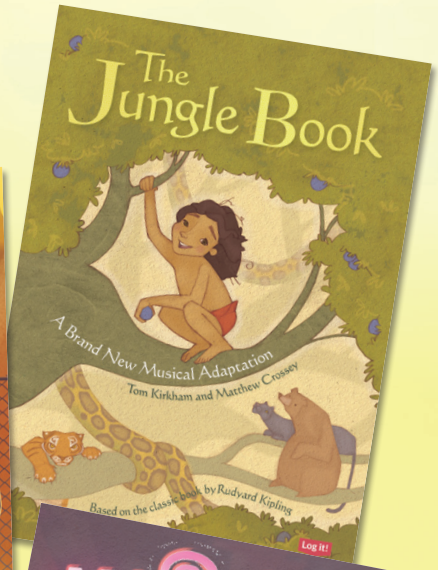

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Banish those BUTTERFLIES!

There's a fine line between nerves and excitement, but as a teacher you have the power to turn flutters into focus...

JUDITH HARRIES

We all have children in our class whose nerves sometimes spoil their experience of performing. This can not only derail their part, but can spread to knock the whole class off kilter.

Picture these scenes...

Rehearsals for the KS2 school concert or play are all going brilliantly but on the day of the performance, a child complains of a tummy ache, feeling sick, nervous, scared, or even label it themselves as 'stage fright'.
Nerves can also be 'caught' as one child expresses their feelings, then others 'catch' them and join in.
Children may start fussing about details that you have been through many times already.
Others might need frequent visits to the toilet.
The class or choir who have been singing boldly and with lots of conviction in rehearsals suddenly appear to 'turn the volume down' and look at their feet.

In KS1, children can also find themselves feeling anxious before a class assembly or school nativity. They find it very hard to see their parent in the audience and might become mute or tearful.

Children working towards a practical music exam or audition may feel increasingly nervous as the 'big day' approaches.
The setting of a performance can have a significant effect on nerves. It's good to be prepared to offer practical advice to children.

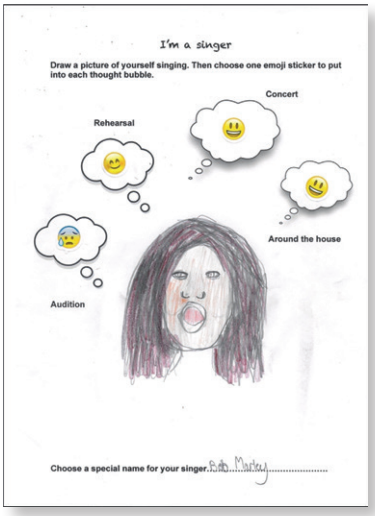

Fig.1

In many of these scenarios, you, the teacher, may become more agitated, tense and less patient as the performance day approaches.

Here are some strategies I use to help pupils feel more relaxed and confident when approaching a performance of some kind:

Singing makes me happy

Anxiety is a natural human emotion: a necessary anticipation of an event and a way to plan for possible futures. There are common physiological changes, such as increase in heart rate, sweating, and a release of adrenaline. Children might describe these as having 'butterflies in their tummy'.
Psychological changes include memory lapses, and a fear of making mistakes. However, the physiological responses of the body to nerves and excitement are exactly the same, and this can help to reassure children.

I recently undertook a study, as part of an MA in the psychology of music education, looking at how singing in different contexts made the children in my county junior choir feel different emotions.
Ninety-five per cent agreed that 'singing makes me happy'. They also ranked singing in different settings with 'singing in concerts' and 'around the house' (including the shower) as the best places to sing. Feelings experienced when singing were marked using a set of emojis, including the happy smiling

face, the sad face, the open-mouth grinning face, the sweating face, and the sleepy face. The children then indicated how they felt by drawing a self-portrait or one of their favourite singer, and using emoji stickers (***see Fig.1***).

The main outcome of the research was that many children were helped by reframing nerves as excitement, before or during a performance, and this is something you can do in school.

How can we help?

My first response if a child tells me they are feeling scared before a performance is to acknowledge it, agree that it is a completely normal response, and admit that I share some of those feelings. This is best done privately as there is a fine balance between the recognition of anxiety, and encouragement of anxiety, so that it becomes a 'learned response'. It can also be quite infectious!

The next step is to attempt to reframe the anxiety or nerves as excitement by explaining that the body changes are identical. I often tell children before a concert that I am feeling excited; I ask who is excited too, and then we try some short-term exercises to 'ground' or manage our feelings. For example, breathe in for a count of two and then out for four. Help children practise stretching out their muscles and moving with control, such as interlocking their fingers and slowly stretching their arms above their heads. You can ask pupils to try this stretch at different speeds, and to notice what muscles they can feel as they move their arms overhead. Finally, during a performance, encourage children (and remind yourself) to stand with both feet firmly grounded on the floor, steady as a rock.

Name it, don't dismiss it

We should always be sensitive to children's individual experiences of anxiety. Some will need more trips to the toilet before a performance; others may need reassurance such as repeating the order of the pieces or reminding them where they are standing. Others will feel better and more prepared if they are allowed to wave at their parents in the audience before the show starts! Some might need a more direct intervention because anxiety has made them experience a dry mouth or they have forgotten their music.

The simple drawing activity above could help children who are not sure how to express their feelings about an upcoming performance or exam. If they seem anxious and unable to say why, encourage them to draw a picture of their favourite singer, musician or even themselves, and annotate it with emojis to indicate their feelings.

You can help younger children who are reluctant to speak in front of others by writing their lines on a piece of card for them to hold up if they feel unable to speak out.

Of course, one of the best ways to prevent anxiety spoiling children's enjoyment of performing is to develop their performance immune system by performing more. Find some ideas in the panel on the right, and… break a leg! TP

POWER UP PERFORMANCE

Try to provide lots of varied opportunities for children to play in front of an audience, even if it only consists of you and/or a few of the child's friends. This develops their 'performance power' and makes them more immune to anxiety symptoms. For example:

- Add a music spot to the weekly achievement assembly, where children who are learning a piece can play to a friendly audience.
- Include a performance spot in weekly music lessons in KS2 so children get used to having the opportunity to play to each other.
- Organise regular music concerts so individuals and groups can play in front of parents and friends.
- Go further afield and take the school choir or music ensembles to play in local music festivals, or entertain the public at shopping centres or residential homes.
- Take the school choir to big events such as Young Voices where they can sing together in a huge, combined choir of children (see **tinyurl.com/tp-YoungVoices**).

Judith Harries is an experienced early years and primary school teacher. She specialises in teaching music, art and drama and creates cross-curricular educational content for a variety of publications.

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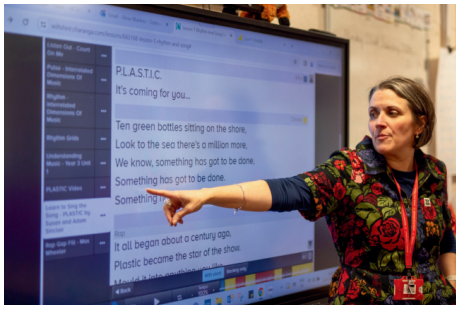

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CREATIVE *composition*

Don't let the fear of hands-on music get to you; a few basic activities can elevate your pupils from madcap to maestros, says **Kristian Parkes**

You know that moment. It's Thursday afternoon, you've got 30 minutes, a box of slightly battered instruments, and the plan says 'composition'. Cue a vague instruction to "create your own music", a rising volume level and, if we're honest, not a lot of actual composing.

But what if composition simply meant giving children clear musical choices, then letting them own the results? At Charanga, we treat composition as a process: exploring, deciding, refining and sharing. The ideas below do exactly that in bite-sized ways. You set the framework; your pupils do the composing.

1. Sound postcards

Start with a place your class has encountered before; either in real life or in books, etc. For example, the seaside, the playground or the rainforest. In KS2, link it to a history or geography topic; in KS1, try 'a busy park' or 'a stormy night'.

Ask the children to close their eyes and list what they might hear – not just obvious sounds, but details: creaky gates, distant traffic, seagulls. Build a shared 'sound menu' on the board.

In small groups, task pupils with creating a sound postcard: a 20–30-second piece with a clear beginning, middle and end. Model this first by layering a few sounds yourself and narrating your choices. They can use untuned percussion, classroom instruments, voices, body sounds or found objects. Younger children might put three sounds in order; older ones can add dynamics and tempo changes. Groups then 'send' their postcard to the class, who guess the place from listening alone. Suddenly, children are thinking about structure, timbre and contrast – the building blocks of composition – without a worksheet in sight.

2. Feelings maps

This works beautifully alongside PSHE. Collect a handful of feelings your class can relate to, then focus on one: 'feeling proud after sports day', for example.

Ask: "If that feeling were a movement, what would it be?" Once they've assigned a movement to their feeling, they can then interpret that movement into sound. A quick, jerky movement might become a spiky rhythm on claves; a slow stretch might be a long, held note on a chime bar.

Give each group one emotion and a small pitch or rhythm playground: two or three chime bars for KS1, a pentatonic scale on glocks for KS2, or voices only. They create a four- or eight-beat phrase that sounds like their feeling. You become the conductor: arrange the phrases into an order, repeat some, layer others. Without realising it, the class is composing with motif, repetition and contrast – and they can explain every decision they have made.

3. Scribbling scores

Many children freeze at the sight of a five-line stave. Graphic notation offers a way in that's playful, visual and musically rigorous.

Play a short extract and ask children to draw what they hear using basic shapes (in Charanga's Graphic Score resource, we use curvy lines for smooth sounds, jagged spikes for sudden bangs and clusters of dots for busy chatter). You're building the idea that sound can be represented symbolically, without worrying about 'right' or 'wrong' notation.

Now flip it. In pairs, children create their own graphic scores for a new piece. Groups swap and perform each other's scores using instruments, voices or body percussion. They're making genuine decisions about texture, dynamics and structure in a scaffolded, accessible way.

4. Digital tracks

For children who struggle with traditional instruments, digital tools can be a game-changer. An accessible digital audio workstation (DAW), like GarageBand, Chrome Music Lab or Charanga's YuStudio®, lets students compose with loops, layers and structure in a way that feels contemporary and intuitive.

Set a tight brief: "Create a 16-bar track to match a short video clip." Guide pupils through a clear pathway: choose a drum loop, add a bass line, select one melodic idea, then decide on a structure. Encourage them to listen back and make one small change each time. You're modelling composition as refining, not just piling sounds on. Children who find traditional notation or fine motor control difficult can still succeed while developing a real understanding of texture, balance and form.

None of these ideas requires you to be a virtuoso, but with clear boundaries, accessible tools and a bit of curiosity, you might be surprised how quickly your class starts to sound like a room full of musicians. **TP**

Kristian Parkes is CPD & training manager at Charanga, and has 28 years' experience as a music teacher and school leader. Start a free 30-day trial of Charanga at charanga.com – no payment details required.

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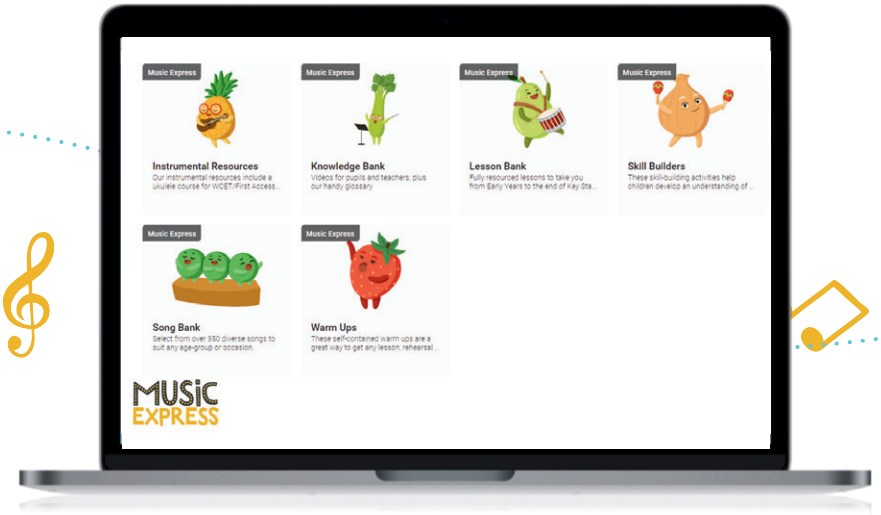

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Making CONNECTIONS

Children are drawing inferences all the time, so why is it such a struggle when analysing texts? asks **Rachel Clarke**

We make inferences all day long – often without realising it. For example, if one of your children comes into the classroom after playtime with a grazed knee and clutching a wet paper towel, you will likely infer that they fell over on the playground. Equally, if your colleague says she has a headache and asks you for a tablet, you will infer that she needs the medicine to help ease her pain.

Two everyday inferences. One that requires us to take our knowledge of grazed knees, the power of the wet paper towel and experience of the rough and tumble of the playground to build a big picture of what likely happened. And another, smaller, inference where we connect two words (headache and tablet) to use our understanding of what a tablet is and how it will help our colleague feel better.

Our children make these everyday inferences, too. Just think how many times they look out of the window, see the rain and ask you if they'll get to go out to play today. They're making connections based on the available information and their previous experiences of what happens to playtime when it rains. They are experts at making everyday inferences, and yet when we ask them to answer inference questions about the texts they read, they find it somewhat more challenging. So, what can we do to help?

The local level

In the first instance, let's take a look at those smaller inferences, which are sometimes called *local inferences*. As with the example of the headache and the tablet, these are connections that, as experienced adult readers, we hardly register that we are being asked to make. But at a very small, local level, all reading requires such inferences, which many of our children struggle to make. Here's a short 'story':

Sarah was thirsty. She asked her mum for a drink.

There are two main vocabulary connections that the reader needs to make to comprehend this story: *Sarah* and *she* are the same person; the *drink* alleviates Sarah's *thirst*. The reader also needs to understand that information from across the sentences should be linked. There's a further challenge in this story, in that if you're not too sure about the pronouns *she* and *her*, you may struggle to connect them correctly to

"The reader needs to understand that information from across the sentences should be linked"

Sarah and *her mum*. To help children who may struggle with making these small, local inferences. I would take the following steps:

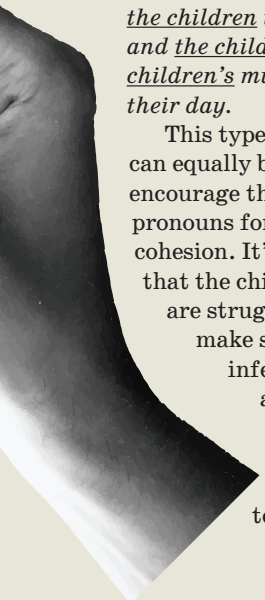
- Tell the story in your own words.
- Identify who the characters in the story are.
- Circle the words that connect.
- Draw arrows between the connecting words showing how the information flows back and forth.

- Talk about how the key information is in more than one sentence.

It's interesting to note that pronouns are often the sticking point. Asking children to change the nouns in a short story, like the one below, into pronouns can help.

The children went to the park. The children played on the swings. Then the children played on the slide. After that the children had an ice-cream. Eventually the children went home and the children told the children's mum about their day.

This type of activity can equally be used to encourage the use of pronouns for written cohesion. It's likely that the children who are struggling to make small, local inferences are also struggling to write cohesive texts.



The global level

The big connections that take place across a text are sometimes called *global inferences*. These are the types of inferences where we may elaborate on top of what we have been told (like our grazed knee story), by making visualisations, exploring themes and forming evaluations.

Film can be a useful tool for helping children to make the visualisations that will help them connect with a text. For example, if you are sharing a story about a jungle, it's unlikely that all the class will have first-hand experience of that environment. So, sharing film clips of jungles will help pupils build suitable images. With these in place, they will find it easier to answer the inference question you may want to ask.

Drawing characters and settings based on the descriptions provided by an author is another useful way to help children create visual images that will support them to build connections across a text. Annotating their drawings with information from the text will be particularly helpful if they are required to reference the text when discussing their inferences.

As a twist on asking children to draw what they read, I recently used ChatGPT to create an image based on a text. The story I used was *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase,* a classic text full of antiquated and complex vocabulary that I didn't expect my students to know. By sharing the image after reading the text, we were able to see the challenging words – *crenelations, herring-bone brickwork, turrets* – in context. We could then open our discussions to make evaluations about how the author had led us to view the house as a safe, warm stronghold surrounded by a dangerous, desolate world. If you've not tried this, I urge you to do so.

Pick and mix

When we identify the theme of a text, we are making very deep inferences that sit below the story or narrative. As adults this can be tricky; for children it can be very hard indeed. A technique that I've found helps with this, is to provide the children with a range of possible themes to explore that suit the story. So, for *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,* you could give the class the option of *friendship, good vs evil, love* or *self-discovery*.

Encourage the children to discuss the themes and why they think they describe the message of the story. As an added extra, you could even print the themes onto cards and ask the children to place them on a target board to show their relevance by their proximity to the bullseye. TP

Rachel Clarke is the director of Primary English Education Consultancy Limited. She works with schools across the UK to raise standards in English. A keen blogger, she runs primaryenglished.co.uk – a website bursting with advice and resources focused on teaching English.

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ASK YOUR TA TO HELP

1 If you have children who struggle with vocabulary, asking your TA to pre-teach key words before the reading lesson can be a valuable use of time.

2 If you have children who struggle to make connections between related words, consider asking your TA to explore riddles with children, such as *I have hands but no face, what am I?* (clock). This playful use of language should grow pupils' vocabularies and help them appreciate how words are related.

3 One of the barriers to making local inferences is recognising pronouns. Ask your TA to run a short intervention on pronouns for any children that need it, making sure they can match pronouns to nouns.

4 For children who struggle to infer feelings, and words associated with emotion, build their bank of emotional language by asking your TA to undertake short role play activities with them where they 'show an emotion'. You could extend this to include synonyms for different feelings.

5 Create a collection of intriguing images. Ask your TA to discuss the images with the children, starting with the phrase "What's going on in this picture?". They should prompt pupils to explain what leads them to make their inferences based on the images and what they may already know.

6 Ask your TA to play *What am I?* – placing sticky notes on pupils' heads and getting them to work out who or what they are by asking questions.

WAGOLL

You're a Bad Man, Mr Gum!

Peer inside the mind of the author, and help pupils understand how to write a comically unlikeable character

The whole thing about *Mr Gum* is that I always credited children with the intelligence and experience to know when they were firmly in 'storyland'. We all know that none of what happens in a story is real, and yet we suspend our disbelief and care about it anyway. With that in mind, I set out to create a cast of larger-than-life characters who would fulfil traditional narrative roles in as 'obvious' a way as possible.

Photo © Paul Musso for Hay Festival

You're a Bad Man, Mr Gum! by Andy Stanton (£7.99, Farshore), is celebrating 20 years

At the same time, I'm not making *fun* of storytelling; I have nothing but respect for fiction. So, I worked hard in the books to convey real emotional truths beneath the artifice. That, then, is the balancing act: how to take stock character roles and demonstrate that I – or anyone – can make something fresh and exciting and singular from such ingredients.

Mr Gum is very clearly there to fulfil the role of being THE VILLAIN. I thought it crucial to make him fairly useless and inept: he's painted as utterly terrifying to the other characters in his world, but I never wanted to make him genuinely frightening to children in real life…

Instead, I wanted those reading my books to be giggling at Mr Gum, going 'UGH!' in revolted outrage and judging him for his obvious failures and shortcomings. Comedy is often about someone doing something 'wrong' and Mr Gum is clear example of somebody who is doing *everything* wrong in life.

To children, much of the adult world must appear insane. So, I turned the insanity up to 11 and gave them permission to laugh at it. The secret formula in *Mr Gum* is very simple: none of the so-called 'adults' has very much sense at all, and it's Mr Gum's nine-year-old nemesis, Polly, who's the moral compass. Underneath all the silliness and irreverence, I'm championing kid power all the way.

FIVE TIPS FOR WRITING COMEDIC CHARACTERS

1. FOCUS ON YOUR HUMOUR

If something makes you laugh, then the chances are it might make someone else giggle, too.

2. JOKES KILL NARRATIVE

They go sideways, whereas narrative goes forward. So, the trick is to keep the narrative progressing whilst nimbly stitching in the jokes wherever you can. This is particularly important when going off on comedic digressions: a digression must A. really earn its place and B. not be so digressive that it kills the pace.

3. COMEDY IS JUST ONE ELEMENT

You still have to give us all the things that any decent writer of fiction must provide: a cast of diverse characters and emotional stakes we care about, suspense, peril, relationships, alliances and enmities, tension… Otherwise you may as well be writing a joke book (no shade on anyone writing joke books, but hey).

4. JOKES HAVE RHYTHM

They are all about the set-up and the pay-off. Construct your smallest jokes with that in mind and your bigger comedic set pieces likewise. What part of the scenario do you want to show? What do you want to hide? When do you want to reveal the surprise and make us laugh?

5. DON'T SELL YOUR READERS SHORT

Fart jokes, poo jokes, bum jokes (and of course 'picking his nose and eating it' jokes) all have their place. But readers deserve a richer comedic menu than constant gross-out. Credit them as such and give them something that will really blow their minds.

Extract from

Chapter 1
pp.1-4

I started by making him an arrestingly physical specimen; someone who will leap off the page and capture the imagination immediately. A strong visual can act like a catchy hook in a pop song, drawing you in immediately.

Mr Gum was a fierce old man with a red beard and two bloodshot eyes that stared out at you like an octopus curled up in a bad cave. He was a complete horror who hated children, animals, fun and corn on the cob. What he liked was snoozing in bed all day, being lonely and scowling at things.

The fact that it's the *cave* which is bad rather than the octopus is a clue that we're entering a comedic world that's perhaps more abstracted than my young readers have encountered before. This is why I tried to keep the character archetypes simple: I wanted to make room to play stylistic games like this.

Now we delve a bit deeper: not only does he look terrifying; he is the sworn enemy of everything nice! But remember, I don't want children to actually be scared of this man, so the inclusion of 'corn on the cob' on his list of dislikes reminds us that we're dealing with a very silly reality here.

He slept and scowled and picked his nose and ate it. Most of the townsfolk of Lamonic Bibber avoided him and the children were terrified of him. Their mothers would say, 'Go to bed when I tell you to or Mr Gum will come and shout at your toys and leave slime on your books!' That usually did the trick.

Mr Gum is all the things we're constantly telling children they shouldn't be. So the reader gets to judge him right off the bat. Note also that 'picking your nose and eating it' is pretty much the worst crime possible to primary school kids (though nearly everyonev secretly does it). Always talk to your readership in their language.

The next logical move is to position him within a larger reality. I wanted to show his place as the outsider, the bogeyman, the scourge of society. This will set things up nicely for the ensuing battles to come, which frequently pitch Mr Gum against the entire town.

And now I'm building him up to an almost mythical figure. I love giving characters their own lore – or in this case, letting the mothers of the town provide the lore. Their relationship to others and their social reputation is a great way to 'thicken' characters and weave them into the fabric of their world.

Mr Gum lived in a great big house in the middle of town. Actually it wasn't that great, because he had turned it into a disgusting pigsty. The rooms were filled with junk and pizza boxes. Empty milk bottles lay around like wounded soldiers in a war against milk, and there were old newspapers from years and years ago with headlines like VIKINGS INVADE BRITAIN and WORLD'S FIRST NEWSPAPER INVENTED TODAY.

Mr Gum's house is an extension of his physical self, i.e. grotesquely horrid. We must always be careful when 'othering' characters via physical tropes so I took care to ground it in that 'storyland' un-reality. To me, the appearance of Mr Gum and his house should feel more like an old-timey comic strip than anything realistically squalid, so I tried hard to push the details for all they are worth.

The most overtly meta-humorous joke in the book so far. There will be plenty more to come. But again, this is my agenda: to make everything about Mr Gum and his world the worst, the grubbiest, the most ancient and worn out... In short, *the pits*. He's so horrible that you just can't help but fall for him.

Insects lived in the kitchen cupboards, not just small insects but great big ones with faces and names and jobs.

I haven't got anything illuminating to say about this but I would like to point out it's a pretty funny joke.

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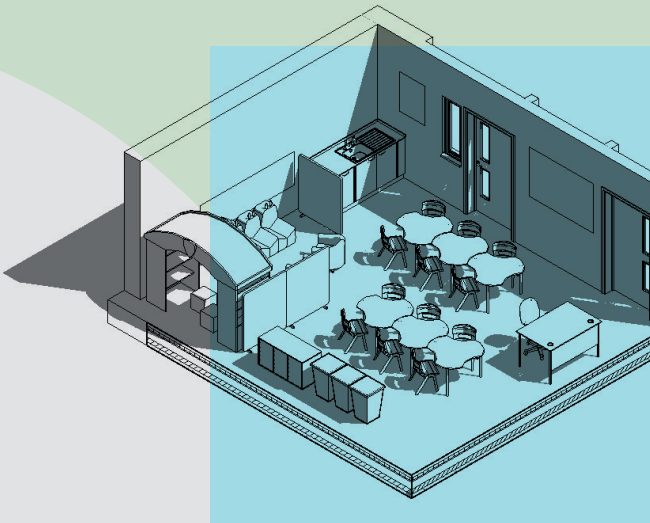

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Published by Wide Eyed Editions, 2026

Young Discoverers

Dig into this inspiring anthology of true stories about children who made extraordinary discoveries, by **Stephen Davies** and **Violaine Leroy**

STEPHEN DAVIES

One scorching summer afternoon in 2018, an 11-year-old Swedish girl called Saga Vanecek was skimming stones in a lake. It was the day of the World Cup final – Croatia versus France.

Saga was feeling along the lake-bed for one more stone, when her hand brushed against something long and rough.

What could it be? A broken branch, perhaps? She grasped the object and hauled it up out of the water...

Children are natural discoverers. They notice things that adults often miss: a strange shape in the ground, an unexpected glimmer, a smell that doesn't quite belong.

Young Discoverers celebrates this innate curiosity through 12 true stories of children and teenagers who stumbled upon something truly extraordinary.

The book spans continents and centuries. It includes a 10-year-old American who sparked a gold rush, a nine-year-old South African who found a trove of hominid fossils, and a group of French teenagers who scrambled head-first into a narrow hole and found themselves surrounded by bucking, stampeding animals – the Lascaux cave paintings. The research for the book was by turns stultifying and electrifying. Dreary hours trawling through newspaper archives in multiple languages were rewarded by occasional flashes of gold. *There! This one is a corker!*

These almost unbelievable stories are matched by magical illustrations from French artist Violaine Leroy, who is known for her soft colour palettes and loose, lively linework. Her rendering of the Northern Lights on page 68 is so gorgeous and dramatic, it made me gasp out loud when I first saw it.

Activities

Vocabulary

Discoverer is a clunky word (that awful '-erer' ending!), but useful nonetheless. Discuss with your class who or what might be a 'discoverer', including people whose job is to discover things. Relevant vocabulary includes *archaeologist*, *palaeontologist*, *fossil-hunter*, *explorer*, *metal detectorist*, *geologist*, *astronomer* and *researcher*.

Encourage children to talk with a partner about accidental discoveries and to imagine five places where somebody might make an accidental discovery. *Hiking in the woods? Digging in your back garden? Looking through binoculars or a telescope? Snorkelling? Walking the dog in the park?* That last one might lead to the question 'Can an animal be a discoverer?' and to the rich seam of comedy that is truffle pigs.

Four senses

All 12 children in the book made their discovery because they were alert to the evidence of their senses.

Have pupils flip through the book and sort the discoverers into groups. Find seven children who made their discovery because of something they saw, two children who heard something, two who felt something and one who smelled something.

Sight – Conrad Reed (gold nugget), Mary Anning (ichthyosaur bones), Hussein Abdel-Rassoul (the top step of Tutankhamun's tomb), Roy Spencer (star sapphire), Matthew Berger (hominid fossils), Kathryn Gray (supernova), Daisy Morris (pterosaur fossil).

Sound – Marcel Ravidat (Lascaux cave paintings), Muhammad Ahmed Al-Hamed (Dead Sea scrolls).

Touch – Jacob Eliahu (Siloam inscription), Saga Vanecek (Viking sword).

Smell – Zhenya Salinder (a woolly mammoth poking out of melting ice).

Group work

Split your class into 12 groups, and assign one of the discoverers to each group (for smaller classes, six groups could cover two discoverers each). Have each group write on a postcard the key information about their discovery, then pin it on a map of the world (you can display this on an interactive whiteboard, or a map on the wall). Labels could include the discovery itself, the name and age of the discoverer, and the place and year of discovery. For example, *Prehistoric cave paintings, Marcel Ravidat (and Robot the dog), France, 1940*. Children could also mark the age of the discovery itself on a timeline below the map. Those Lascaux cave paintings, for example, are a jaw-dropping 17,000 years old.

Have each group present their young discoverer to the rest of the class. Pupils could prepare a drama of the discovery or a motionless tableau of one key moment. Hot-seating is another option: "So, Roy, when did you first realise that the lump of black rock you were using as a doorstop was actually a priceless sapphire?"

> "Young Discoverers *celebrates children's innate curiosity*"

Take it further

FINDING FABERGÉ

Over a hundred years ago, a jeweller called Peter Fabergé made 52 extraordinary Easter eggs for the empresses of Russia. Each creation was crafted not from chocolate but from gold, rubies and diamonds. Forty-five of these beauties are in museums and millionaires' mansions. Another recently turned up in a jumble sale. The other six are missing… at least for now. Tell your class about Fabergé, then get them writing imaginative stories about a child who discovers one of the missing eggs in an unlikely location. As you prep them for this task, encourage them to zoom in on the moment of discovery itself. Model on the board how a few seconds of real time in a story can be expanded to three or four paragraphs of writing. I remember my old English teacher Mr Flower pacing our classroom, stroking his toothbrush moustache and chanting his favourite mantra: "Write more about less! Write more about less! Write more about less!"

THINKING LIKE DISCOVERERS

Eleven of my 12 young discoverers were outside when they made their momentous find. Encourage pupils to think like discoverers in their own environment. What *could* be discovered locally? Roman roads, old pottery, fossils, lost place-names, wildlife, old photographs, oral histories? Find an opportunity to get outside with your class and get into discovery mode. Link this expedition to a history unit, a museum trip or geography fieldwork. Alternatively, ask pupils to keep a discovery diary for a week. Tell them to jot down moments when they notice something new, puzzling or unexpected, even if it turns out to be nothing. The emphasis is on noticing, questioning and recording, not on finding something mind-blowing… although if they do end up finding the remains of an English king buried beneath a local car park, give them an achievement point.

Entry points

Each of the discovery stories in the book is full of drama and simple emotion, centring on a single 'wow moment' of delighted realisation: *I've found something!* You do not need to read the stories sequentially with your class. Instead, use them as exciting entry-points to particular units in history, geography or science. Use Hussein as a way into Ancient Egypt, Marcel as a time machine to the Stone Age and Kathryn as a shuttle into space.

I had to include Mary Anning in my book, but if years of teaching Year 3 Rocks and Soils have left you all Anning-ed out, then swap Mary for the more recent story of young Daisy Morris. In 2008, Daisy discovered a new species of pterosaur on a beach near her home on the Isle of Wight. Her find ended up in the Natural History Museum, in a drawer right next to some of Mary Anning's pterosaurs. She even got to have the new species named after her. *Vectidraco daisymorrisae* literally means Daisy Morris's Isle of Wight Dragon.

Adventurous assembly

Need a quick assembly idea that is guaranteed to grab and hold the attention of a large group? Choose any story from *Young Discoverers*, then scan and crop it to isolate Violaine's glorious illustrations. Project the images and retell the story in your own words. Let your eyes bulge and your voice quiver with emotion.

In a recent KS2 assembly, I shared the story of young Matthew Berger discovering a cache of prehistoric hominid bones in a South African cave network. Matthew's route to the bones was a claustrophobe's nightmare – inching through a narrow tunnel nicknamed Superman's Crawl, across a series of sharp ridges known as the Dragon's Back and down the dreaded Chute, a narrow shaft with an 18-inch pinch point. When Matthew finally reached the bones, he was so excited, his hands were trembling so violently that he had to wait five minutes before starting to take photographs.

Forgotten discoverers

The book ends with two young discoverers whose names have been lost to time. The first was a Scottish boy was forced to spend an afternoon digging in his school's potato patch as a punishment for bad behaviour. He dug up what he thought was a potato, then turned it over and saw that it was the head of an Ancient Egyptian statuette. The second was an eight-year-old Congolese girl who was playing in a pile of rubble near her uncle's house and discovered an enormous diamond. The diamond went on a glamorous world tour and sold at auction for 12 million dollars, but the girl herself received none of the fame or fortune that should have been hers.

These forgotten discoverers could inspire some wonderfully emotive writing from your pupils. Ask them to write a diary entry from the point of view of the Scottish boy or the Congolese girl, describing the moment of discovery and what happened afterwards. Alternatively, pupils could set history right by penning the newspaper article that should have been written to celebrate the momentous find. **TP**

Loved this? Try these...

- *The Secret of the Forest of Lascaux* by Thierry Félix and Philippe Bigotto
- *The Fossil Hunter* by Kate Winter
- *The Street Beneath My Feet* by Charlotte Guillain and Yuval Zommer
- *Great Adventurers* by Alastair Humphreys and Kevin Ward
- *Footprints: Walk the Path of our Earliest Ancestors* by Stephen Davies and Kalina Muhova (coming Sept 26!)

Stephen Davies is an author, and enjoys visiting primary schools to conduct discovery-themed writing workshops.

authorsabroad.com

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

Many of the stories in this book could spark hands-on science or art activities. If you've been reading about Matthew Berger or Daisy Morris, borrow a table-top sandpit from Key Stage 1 and create an archaeological dig in the classroom. Hide bones, ammonites or terracotta fragments in the sand and give pupils brushes to uncover them.

If you've been reading about Marcel Ravidat and his dog Robot, get your class painting stags and bison on rough, textured paper. The stone-age artists of Lascaux used charcoal for black, berries for red, and wet clay for brown and ochre. Gather some (safe) natural materials and turn your classroom into a cathedral of dazzling cave art.

THE GREAT DEBATE

"Finders keepers, losers weepers!" How many times have you heard that yawp of triumph ring out across the school playground? And is it always true? *Young Discoverers* doesn't just celebrate the moment of discovery, it also explores what happens next, raising thorny questions about ownership, responsibility and fairness. When Marcel and his friends discovered the Lascaux caves, they swore to each other that they would keep it secret, returning day after day to cavort and picnic among the prehistoric paintings. But the magnitude of their find weighed heavily on them, and their secret lasted less than a week. Use this story as a springboard for classroom debate. Ask:

- Who owns a discovery? The finder, the landowner, or society?
- Should discoveries always go to museums, or do private collectors have a role?
- Should a discoverer's age affect who should take responsibility for a find?
- Are there times when it's better to keep a discovery secret?

Split the class into groups, each representing a different viewpoint (a discoverer, a museum curator, a government official) and let them argue their case. Encourage them to support their points with examples from the book and from real history.

Can we teach 'NATURAL FLAIR'?

It sounds like an oxymoron, but it is possible to imbue your pupils with this seemingly elusive skill, says **Saira Shah**

"Natural flair." You've heard the phrase before, but what does it mean? A child who writes stories with *natural flair* is a confident writer. They use writing strategies with ease and effect, and have developed their own authorial voice.

I used to think this was not something we could teach. You either had it or you didn't. But I don't believe this anymore. Why? Because I've taught myself how to write with *natural flair* by learning creative writing strategies.

I've learned the same story strategies used in publishing, TV and film, gaming, streaming platforms and content creation industries. But for some unknown reason, we're not teaching these in schools. Whilst those industries are thriving, the number of children writing for pleasure is declining. With rapid AI advancement, the ability to tell a uniquely human story is what will differentiate our pupils in future employment markets.

Here are three high-impact strategies to implement right now in your English curriculum:

1. The main protagonist: needs vs wants

Children often write characters who simply have things happen to them. To create depth, we need to teach our pupils to distinguish between the external goal and the internal need.

- **The want (external goal):** winning the football trophy.
- **The need (internal need):** learning to be a team player.

Teacher Tip: Ask your pupils, *'What is your character secretly afraid of?'* When a child knows their hero is lonely or seeking approval, their dialogue, descriptions and character choices begin to reflect this.

2. The antagonist: the villain's backstory

Sometimes children make the villain evil just for the sake of being evil. Their actions don't make sense and don't have any purpose. As a result, the story can read as dull and flat. To overcome this, we must challenge pupils to build a backstory for their antagonist, and remember that nobody is born evil.

Teacher Tip: Ask your pupils, *'What happened to this character five years ago to make them this way?'* This will help children delve deeper into their villain, and introduce shades of grey. A giant isn't just scary; he's protective of his home. A 'mean girl' isn't just rude; she's insecure.

3. The Story Mountain – add story beats

The traditional Story Mountain can sometimes lead to a *'and then this happened'* style of writing. By adding story beats (crucial moments), children learn to pace their narrative, and build tension and relief points using a professional storytelling structure.

Teacher Tip: Try adding these three beats to the incline of the mountain:

- **The inciting incident:** the moment the world changes for the hero. E.g. In *Harry Potter*, it's when the Hogwarts letter arrives for him.
- **The point of no return:** where the hero commits to the new journey. E.g. Harry Potter is at King's Cross Station and runs through a brick wall to get to Hogwarts.
- **The 'all is lost' moment:** a low point for the hero just before the 'problem' and peak of the mountain. E.g. Ron is knocked unconscious on the chess board, so Harry finds himself alone and fears he is no match to face Voldemort.

Writing stories is so much more than grammar and punctuation checklists at moderation meetings. Whilst those technical foundations are essential, true progression and attainment happen when a child can imaginatively capture the human experience on the page. By moving past rigid checklists and embracing creative writing strategies, we will empower our pupils to find their own authorial voice.

Teach storytelling. Teach natural flair. TP

Saira Shah is a teacher, author and CPD provider. Her latest book, **Super Nani and Captain Yaz,** *illustrated by Maria Gabriela Gama (£7.99, Templar Books), is out now.*

saira-shah.com

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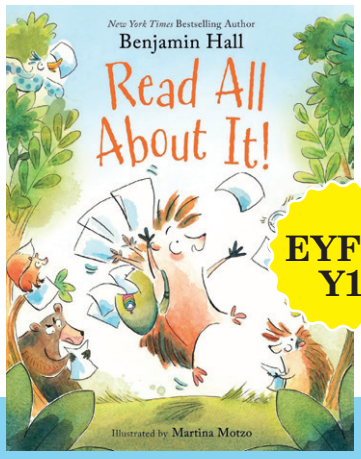
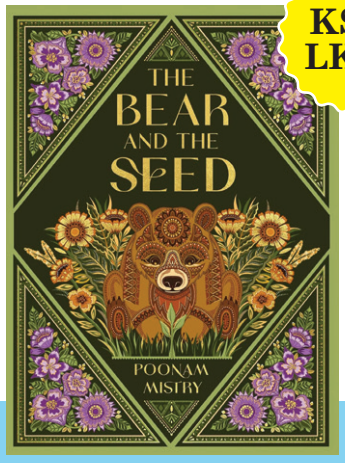
Book CLUB

We review five new titles that your class will love

REVIEWS BY KATE HEAP



EYFS/ Y1



KS1/ LKS2

KS1/ KS2

Read All About It!

by Benjamin Hall
ill. Martina Motzo

(£14.99HB, Harper Collins Children's)

This is a charming picture book sharing big messages about working together, thinking creatively and using our skills to solve even the toughest problems. Little Hedgehog is keen to write for the newspaper, just like his father. As he heads out for the day in search of adventure, he comes across a baby owl who has fallen out of a tree. No one is around to help and there's a hungry bear on the prowl! Hedgehog knows he has to get the message out, so uses the power of his words to warn the rest of the forest. His courage and quick thinking save the day. Martina Motzo's gorgeous illustrations combine with Benjamin Hall's energetic story to create a loveable character and a whole gang of forest friends who model writing for a purpose and helping others.

The Bear and the Seed

by Poonam Mistry

(£12.99HB, Bonnier Books)

A beautiful combination of folklore and conservation, *The Bear and the Seed* reminds readers of our important role as guardians of nature.
Bear and the other animals live in a dense forest, surrounded by the magic of life and growth. One day, the trees and plants disappear, and the animals can no longer live there. Heartbroken, Bear wants to help. He finds the last seed and nurtures it into a seedling, hoping it will grow and replenish his forest home. When winter arrives, Bear is determined to protect this tiny plant but is forced to give in to his natural instinct to hibernate. Months later, his determination is rewarded by a beautiful sapling that brings life to the forest once more. Poonam Mistry shares essential messages through rich patterns, vibrant colours and inspirational storytelling.

The Velveteen Rabbit

ill. David Litchfield, based on the story by Margery Williams

(£12.99HB, Scholastic)

The classic tale of *The Velveteen Rabbit* has been brought to life by award-winning illustrator David Litchfield. This abridged picture book edition has been created with all the love and life of the original, sharing poignant messages about the unbreakable bond between a child and their favourite stuffed animal.
A toy rabbit lives in the cupboard with all the other playthings. The old Skin Horse shares his wisdom about the magic of childhood and how to be loved so much you become real. Rabbit longs to experience this but doesn't really understand how it happens. Over time, he becomes a treasured friend for the boy and, despite becoming shabby with age, he finally discovers what it means to be the most precious thing in the world for a child.

RECOMMENDED

RESOURCES

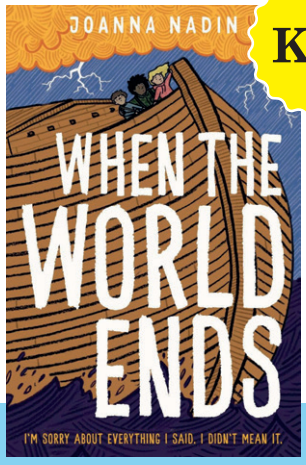
plazoom

COMPREHENSION TRANSITION ACTIVITIES

In their final term of KS2, the theme of 'transition' is one that could hardly be more relevant for pupils, and the texts in this unit have been carefully commissioned to give them an opportunity to share any doubts or worries they may have, as well as understanding others' situations. Visit **tinyurl.com/plz-transition**

KS1/ KS2

KS2



Once Upon an Island

by Alice Albinia, ill. Helen Cann

(£16.99HB, Magic Cat Publishing)

Once Upon an Island takes readers from the south seas to the far north. This hugely engaging non-fiction book explores the people and places of fascinating islands from across the world. With eye-catching illustrations and bite-sized pieces of information, there are so many facts to discover. Novelist and historian Alice Albinia and illustrator Helen Cann have joined forces to create an atlas of islands for children to read together. Each double-page spread shares a map of an island, descriptive paragraphs detailing important features, and key facts linked to informative illustrations. This book is a must-have for KS1 and KS2 class libraries and a helpful resource for primary geography topics.

When the World Ends

by Joanna Nadin

(£7.99, Fox & Ink Books)

Through a combination of poetry, prose and personal journal, readers follow two groups of children struggling to survive in an unimaginable world. After years of warnings about the use of plastic straws and melting polar ice caps, it's happened: sea levels have risen by 60 metres, coastal communities are underwater and resources are scarce. This is a crisis like no other, and life will never be the same again. Exploring a dystopian view of the world after a fictional second pandemic and the war that followed it, Nadin creates a blunt and incredibly powerful view of what the world might be like when Mother Nature fights back. Explore finding hope in loss, sustainable living, and what it means to be displaced.

Meet the author

BENJAMIN HALL ON WHEN RULES AND IDEALS CLASH, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF STANDING UP FOR OTHERS

What inspired Hedgehog's anxiety about breaking rules?

I wouldn't call it anxiety as much as the idea that rules do matter, and that if your parents set them, they're worth following! But Hedgehog has been taught another rule: to stand up for those who need help and to protect one another. So when he has to make the decision between the two, he realises there's a bigger responsibility (protecting baby owl and saving the forest), that matters more.

What rule do you think should be broken more often?

Perhaps the rule that says, 'Don't rock the boat'. In fact, I think that we should all speak more loudly if it'll help others, and if a rule stops you doing so, then it may need bending. A great rule is that children should be more proactive, go on adventures and explore the real world, just as Hedgehog did. It's far more exciting out there than on screens.

How would you like teachers to use your book in the classroom?

I'd hope as an exciting adventure, but also one that leads to conversations about courage, community, and when to follow rules vs standing up for values. I hope it could be a springboard for writing class too – a 'forest newsroom' perhaps, or posters that Hedgehog might have drawn. As a journalist and war correspondent, I hope that Hedgehog's story reflects my own beliefs; that speaking up and standing up for others can be the bravest thing you do, and bring about great change.

Read All About It! **by Benjamin Hall, illustrated by Martina Motzo (£14.99HB, Harper Collins Children's), is out now.**

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Top of the class

Resources and activities to bring fresh inspiration to your classroom

1 Inspire reading for pleasure in KS2

In the National Year of Reading, BookTrust has launched its Bookbuzz Primary programme to support schools to inspire their Key Stage 2 children's love of reading. The evidence-informed programme gives children in Years 3-6 the chance to choose and keep a book they'll love from an expert-curated list of 16 new, diverse and inclusive titles for just £3.65 a pupil.

The programme gives teachers the tools to create engaging sessions with high-quality resources and supporting guidance, helping their pupils develop reading for pleasure skills without adding to teachers' workloads.

Find out more: **booktrust.org.uk/bookbuzz-primary**
Contact: **bookbuzzprimary@booktrust.org.uk**

3 Boost reading in your school

Pageticker is the UK's top-rated digital reading diary for primary schools, encouraging children to read more. Teachers can see every pupil's progress at a glance, celebrate achievements with badges and rewards, and set easy-to-monitor reading challenges over the holidays. Children get tailored book recommendations and parents can log reading at home with a free app. Senior leaders get clear whole-school insight, plus seamless MIS integration. Enjoy free whole-school access to all features until September 2026, and see how Pageticker boosts reading in your school. Visit **pageticker.com**

4 Protecting primary schools from wear & tear

Primary schools are vibrant, active spaces where walls and doors can quickly show signs of everyday wear and tear. Yeoman Shield wall and door protection systems help keep learning environments looking clean, safe and well maintained. Designed to absorb impacts from busy corridors, classrooms and dining areas, our durable solutions help prevent costly damage caused by bags, furniture and daily activity. Easy to maintain and available in a range of colours and finishes, Yeoman Shield products combine practical protection with a welcoming appearance, helping primary schools create bright, resilient spaces where young pupils can learn and thrive.
Visit **yeomanshield.com**

2 Support KS2 pupils through secondary transition

Academy21, the UK's leading DfE-accredited online alternative provision, supports Key Stage 2 pupils as they prepare for the move to secondary school. Working in partnership with schools and local authorities, the provision delivers flexible early intervention for pupils who may be anxious, disengaged, or on non-standard timetables. With curriculum-aligned teaching that builds confidence in core subjects and positive learning routines, pupils are better prepared academically and emotionally for Year 7. For schools, this targeted support complements existing provision.
Learn more at **academy21.co.uk/primary**

5 Affordable, quick solutions

If you're looking to enhance your school's outdoor spaces but are tight on budget or time, Fordingbridge's new range of off-the-shelf canopies offer a smart, speedy solution. Choose from two pre-designed timber structures and you can have your new canopy in place within just 8 weeks:

- Timber canopies (2-6m) – ideal for covered walkways and outdoor learning spaces
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Geography, Outdoor Learning

Design your own pollinator pathway

Follow the bees to discover how connected pockets of nature are bringing a healthy buzz to city life, with **Catherine Barr**

@catherine_barr @catherinebarrbooks

By 2050, two out of every three people on Earth will probably live in cities. But nature brings joy, health, and climate resilience – so from living seawalls and high-rise forests, to guerrilla gardens and pollinator pathways, cities are going wild. In this lesson, children will learn what pollination is (the process by which pollen grains are transferred from one plant to another, resulting in seed production) and how bees and other insects pollinate most of the food we eat. They will then turn this theory into practice, and help design their very own pollinator pathway.

WHAT THEY'LL LEARN

- What pollination is and why it matters
- Who the pollinators are and where they find tasty nectar
- How to create a simple map of a pollinator pathway
- The benefits of nature to people and wildlife in cities
- Locations of nature-friendly cities (e.g. Liverpool, Ljubljana, Utrecht)

START HERE

First, share picture examples of different insects and ask children to identify pollinators by helping you create YES and NO piles. There are 1,500 pollinating species in the UK, and children might be surprised by some of them – such as wasps. Have a class discussion to learn and clarify what pollination is and why it is important. Write a simple definition for reference on the board, such as the one from the intro above. Introduce the context of nature in cities and ask children to come up with ideas of habitats for wildlife in urban areas. Explain that you will be discovering and talking about the places where pollinators thrive: both in the classroom and perhaps on a class walk.

MAIN LESSON

1 | FIND NATURE'S STEPPING STONES

Introduce the children to the idea of a pollinator pathway or 'insect superhighway' in a city. Use the example of stepping stones as nectar food stops across an urban environment. Ask the children to work in groups to identify what these stepping stones might be in a city. They can work with a partner to write (or perhaps draw) examples where bees and other pollinators might find nectar in an urban environment. Encourage children to think of or draw places for bee-friendly plants that others might not have thought of, with a Best Buzzy Bee Winner for the most unusual or popular idea!

Organise a local nature walk or encourage children to go outside so they can look out for places where insects might thrive in the playground or at home, and bring these ideas to the classroom discussion.

Have pupils present their ideas to the class, and create a list together. Ideas might include windowsill pots, uncut road verges, bug hotels, allotments, parks and city gardens, flowering weeds in pavement cracks, graveyards, green roofs on bus stops, playground planters, traffic roundabouts, office rooftop gardens and even bug hotels.

"From living seawalls and high-rise forests, to guerilla gardens and pollinator pathways, cities are going wild"

Demonstrate what a bug hotel is and share visual examples with the children. You might then encourage pupils to come up with ideas about why people need to build bug hotels. This is an opportunity to talk more about the importance of nature in concreted cities, where it can be challenging for nature to thrive without our help.

2 | MAP A GREEN CITY

Now it's time for the children to make their own imaginary pollinator pathway city maps. First, they must draw a simple urban map. Explain that they should include the bee-friendly nature spots or stepping stones discussed previously, and before putting pen to paper, initiate a class discussion about city maps: what is included in different maps and why.

Share examples of city maps with the children and look out for nature hotspots. A quick search online should garner plenty of results, or you can pinpoint your local area using a tool like Google Maps. Can pupils spot any nature hotspots not already included on the class list? If so, add them in before they start drawing their own maps.

Split the children into groups, and pick a leader in each group to do the drawing (or the children can nominate the drawer). Explain that all pupils will contribute to the creation of a simple map of a city environment, but that one person will be the designated scribe. Each map can include a choice of buildings (perhaps houses, a school, a church, a hospital or an office block), alongside streets. Ask the children to pick five of the nature stepping stones from the class list and include them in their maps.

Finally, provide each group with a sheet of A3 paper, and encourage pupils to colour in their stepping stones so these green hotspots stand out in vibrant colours, bringing their cityscapes to life.

3 | JOIN A POLLINATOR PATHWAY

Use the familiar idea of 'joining the dots' to introduce the idea of pollinators buzzing and flying between the nature stepping stones on the children's city maps.

Talk about the fact that pollinator pathways will not be straight lines, but rather a zig-zag network from plant to plant.

You can draw these pollinator pathways onto the maps using brightly coloured pens and dotted lines, or you could use a different material, such as coloured wool, sticking it down to each hotspot using glue or a pin. These journey lines will create an overlaid texture to each map, so the pollinator pathways really stand out.

Catherine Barr writes to inspire curiosity and care for nature. She studied ecology, and has worked with Greenpeace and the Natural History Museum in London.

EXTENDING THE LESSON

- Research cities that are actively encouraging nature. There are many ways that cities around the world are bringing nature back. For example, Singapore is known as a 'City within a Garden' – find out why. Discover the ways UK coastal and inland cities are helping nature thrive: from living seawalls in Plymouth to bees in Liverpool and canal-side orchards in Birmingham.
- Design and build a small pollinator pathway in your playground – can you put plant pots where there is little or no green space? Or build a bug hotel out of found objects (cardboard tubes, sticks, etc) and set it up outside?

Download a sheet of buzzy bee facts at

tinyurl.com/beefacts

USEFUL QUESTIONS

- How can building a city threaten or destroy nature? Think about cities in different landscapes around the world.
- What are the benefits of nature for people living in cities?
- What are the challenges faced by wildlife living in cities?

Citizenship

Power up and protect our planet, together

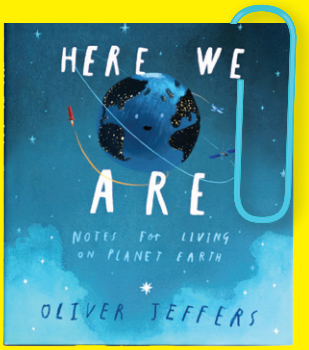
Equip learners with actionable next steps they can take to learn about sustainability this Earth Day, with **Joanna Brown**

WHAT THEY'LL LEARN

- The purpose of Earth Day and its ongoing impact
- Valuable actions that individuals, families, schools and communities can take to support the planet
- The comparative impact of taking different beneficial actions
- The power of making their own pledge for the planet

'When individuals act, communities form. When communities speak up, leaders listen' **(earthday.org)**. Earth Day presents an invaluable opportunity for learners to participate in a global call to harness human power in support of our planet. In this lesson, pupils will explore actionable ways to make their own mark, not just for one special day but as an ongoing commitment to Earth's healing and protection. Through a sequence of engaging, thought-provoking activities, children consider the power they can individually and collectively bring to this worldwide goal, reflecting on this year's theme of 'Our Power, Our Planet'.

START HERE



Capture initial curiosity using Oliver Jeffers' book, *Here We Are*. You can find many read-alouds of the book on YouTube, and you can see an introduction to the title at **tinyurl.com/tp-HereWeAre** – though I recommend getting your own copy if you can. Jeffers' beautiful book illustrates the precious and exquisite nature of planet Earth alongside our vital human role as responsible custodians of it. Focus pupils' reflections on a key quote from the book: 'Though we have come a long way, we haven't quite worked everything out, so there is plenty left for you to do.' Explain that we will consider ways that we can be involved in the 'plenty' of actions, both individual and collective, that are left to be done for our Earth.

MAIN LESSON

1 | SMALL STEPS

Present learners with a concentric circle diagram consisting of four circles, labelled from the inner circle outwards with the headings *myself*, *my family*, *my school* and *my community*. Highlight the **earthday.org** quotation on the board: 'Small actions, taken consistently, create real change.' Invite pupils to reflect on the actions that they as individuals currently take to support the wellbeing of our planet; for example, using reusable fruit and vegetable bags at the supermarket instead of one-use plastic bags. Ask the children to record one or more small actions they can think of for each of the circles and the group of people represented by them. They may benefit from communication with a talk partner to consider ways their school and wider community act to promote the health of our planet. Throughout the modelling, the time spent recording and during the feedback discussion, highlight how each of these actions, no matter how small, constitutes humans using their power to protect the planet.

2 | POWERFUL ACTIONS

Next, explain that the organisers of Earth Day have created a set of '50 Earth Day Tips'. These are ideas of ways

"Earth Day presents an invaluable opportunity for learners to participate in a global call to harness human power for good"

to get actively involved, using our human power to positively impact the planet. Enforce the idea that these actions are for every day, not just for the designated 'Earth Day' itself. The 50 tips can be found on the **earthday.org** website. Select nine tips of most relevance to your class, and read each one out together with a choral whole-class voice.

For example: taking a climate change quiz; reading a book about climate solutions; learning about pollinators; reading rather than streaming; growing an organic garden; picking up litter on a daily walk; being plastic-free for a day; visiting a park; planting a tree.

Address any misconceptions about the tips before explaining that learners will work in groups to rank them using a Diamond 9 formation, otherwise known as 'diamond ranking', in order of which they deem most powerful in impact. Encourage pupils to discuss in their teams where they will rank each action, backing up their arguments with reason, such as 'picking up litter is an important step because lots of people can do it to make a big change together'. Emphasise clearly that even the one they choose to go at the bottom of the diamond is still a powerful action to take. Once each team has created their diamond, decisions and reasoning are presented to the class. It is interesting to see how varied the diamonds are across the different groups. Valuable debate may well ensue and certainly did in my class. I was particularly impressed with the reasoning skills demonstrated.

At times, learners challenged each other to reconsider, effectively presenting an alternative perspective on initial ideas.

3 | NEXT STEPS

Reinforce the fact that 'Our Power, Our Planet' refers to everyone making sustainable choices, wherever and whenever possible, to create cumulative change for the Earth. As such, we will all now, adults included, consider a readily actionable pledge that we can commit to taking as our powerful contribution. You could even make giant letters out of paper or card, making up the phrase 'Our Power, Our Planet' on which to record the pledges. This would create a lasting record of the pledges made, also emphasising the collective responsibility inherent in the Earth Day 2026 strapline. Find a template in the download link on the right. Display this for further reflective reference in the future. Learners may benefit from supportive discussion in selecting a next step that they can realistically and successfully action.

Joanna Brown is an experienced KS2 teacher, currently teaching a Year 3 class.

EXTENDING THE LESSON

- Decide on an action that you can work to achieve as a class, or perhaps more widely into the school community. For example, a waste-free packed lunch initiative.
- Explore other global initiatives such as the Global Goals for Sustainable Development (globalgoals.org) and organisations such as Teaspoons of Change (teaspoonsofchange.org). This will deepen understanding and show children that positive changes are already being made.
- Learners can spread their messages of sustainability and conservation by creating posters to display around the school, encouraging community involvement.

teachwire

Download your free sustainable goals template at

tinyurl.com/EarthDay26

USEFUL QUESTIONS

- How can individual actions have far-reaching effects across the planet?
- Which of our many uses of energy could we reduce or even stop?
- Why do humans continue to negatively impact the Earth despite often knowing better?

KS2 LESSON PLAN

English, Science

Marshmallow frogs and fronted adverbials

Use natural history clips from Sir David Attenborough to spark excitement for grammar, with **David Millington**

facebook.com/NaturalCurric naturalcurriculum.co.uk

WHAT THEY'LL LEARN

- Craft sentences with fronted adverbials showing where, when, how and how often actions occur
- Use ambitious vocabulary in descriptive fronted sentences about marsh-mallow frogs
- Deepen science knowledge of adaptation and food chains
- Develop oracy through rich discussion, turn-taking and active listening

In this lesson, your pupils will be transported to the Namib Desert and introduced to the fascinating nighttime world of the aptly named marshmallow frog. After watching a short film clip of this desert-dweller attempting to catch juicy termites, children will have opportunities to read, discuss and write fronted adverbial sentences about the stumpy, slow-moving amphibian and her sandy habitat. The lesson is based on material from the Natural Curriculum, a teaching and learning platform designed to improve children's knowledge, understanding and interest in the natural world.

START HERE

Play a clip from *A Perfect Planet* showing a marshmallow frog waddling across the Namib Desert in search of termites (**tinyurl.com/tp-MarshmallowFrog**). Use Google Earth to locate the desert and help children build a strong sense of place. Highlight that, unusually for an amphibian, the frog lives far from water, linking this to prior learning about animal classification in science. Deepen curiosity by asking: would you rather live beside a cool pond or survive in the hot desert? Follow with a short hot-seating oracy task, where partners take turns as reporter and marshmallow frog. Encourage the reporters to ask probing follow-on questions.

MAIN LESSON

1 | THE GRAMMAR BIT

Explain that a fronted adverbial is a word, phrase or clause placed at the beginning of a sentence to give extra information about the main action. It tells the reader more about when, where, or how something happens. A fronted adverbial is followed by a comma, then the main clause.

Now introduce some fronted adverbials linked to the film clip:

1. **In the cool of the night**, the marshmallow frog creeps out of her sunless, sandy dwelling.
2. **Found in the coastal deserts of Namibia and South Africa**, these little, round creatures are only as long as your thumb.
3. **Shuffling slowly across the sand dunes**, she finally reaches her termite platter.

Take time to explore ambitious or unfamiliar vocabulary. Ask the children: can these fronted adverbials be moved to the end of the sentence? Discuss how moving them changes the emphasis. When placed at the beginning, the fronted adverbial creates atmosphere and builds anticipation. When moved to the end, the action comes first and the extra detail feels less dramatic. Children can consider which version sounds more effective and why.

To maintain curiosity and engagement, drop in facts, such as how the marshmallow frog makes a high-pitched

"Transport your pupils to the Namib Desert, and introduce the world of the aptly-named Marshmallow Frog"

squeaking sound; very much like a squeaky toy!

2 | WHITEBOARD CHALLENGES

By this stage, children should be able to recognise fronted adverbials and understand their purpose. The following whiteboard challenges give them structured opportunities to apply their learning:

Challenge 1

First, write the main clause on a flipchart: *A marshmallow frog sets off in search of food*.

Ask pupils to extend the sentence by adding a fronted adverbial describing when the action took place. With the film clip in mind, they might write:

- *As darkness descends,*
- *In the dead of night,*
- *When the termites became active,*

Remind them to include a comma after the fronted adverbial.

Challenge 2

Next, write the fronted adverbial: *Flicking out its long, sticky tongue*,

Challenge children to write a complete sentence that includes this opener. Again, with the film clip in mind, they might write: *Flicking out its long, sticky tongue, the amphibian snapped up the termites*.

When children read their sentences aloud, ask them to clap for punctuation: two claps for the comma after the fronted adverbial and one clap for the full stop. This reinforces accurate punctuation in an active, memorable way.

Challenge 3

Provide a prepared word wall including descriptive vocabulary from Sir David Attenborough's narration (*desert-dweller, stumpy, waddled*) and technical terms (*termites, amphibian, predator*).

As an oracy enrichment activity, children could work in pairs to build one sentence together. They must say the sentence aloud, one word at a time each, ensuring it contains a fronted adverbial and at least two words from the word wall. This activity develops careful listening, clear articulation and collaborative sentence construction – key speaking and listening skills that will ultimately strengthen writing outcomes.

3 | INSPIRED BY NATURE

To consolidate learning, you can use a worksheet offering further practice with fronted adverbials while deepening understanding of how the marshmallow frog is adapted to desert life.

Activities include matching fronted adverbials to the correct main clauses and rewriting sentences by moving an adverbial from the end to the beginning, remembering to use a comma to separate ideas clearly.

You can either create your own worksheet, or download a ready-made one from the Natural Curriculum at **tinyurl.com/tp-FrogWorksheet**

David Millington teaches across the primary age range in Bristol and works with the Educational Recording Agency, where he is the creator and producer of the multi-award winning Natural Curriculum teaching and learning platform.

EXTENDING THE LESSON

The children could showcase their understanding of fronted adverbials and marshmallow frog adaptations through longer written pieces:

- Journal: imagine discovering the marshmallow frog in the Namib Desert. Write a journal entry describing observations and explaining the choice of name.
- Advert: write a persuasive property advert for 'Hot Homes Estate Agents', helping a desert frog sell its sandy habitat.
- Diary: write in the first person as the marshmallow frog, recounting an evening termite hunt when something goes wrong.
- Dragon's Den (oracy): using the Frog-Move Rove invention – helping slow-moving marshmallow frogs catch fast-moving termites (see it on the Natural Curriculum website or download at tinyurl.com/tp-FrogMover) – set up the classroom as a Dragon's Den. Here the children can pitch the invention to investors, persuading them to fund its production for marshmallow frogs.

USEFUL QUESTIONS

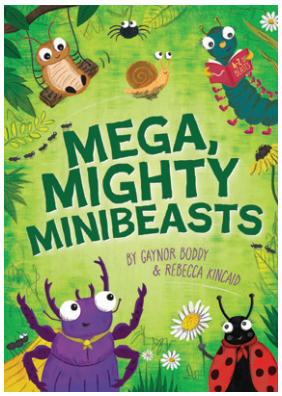
- Which part of this sentence tells us when, where or how an action happened?
- Why might a writer choose to put the adverbial at the front?
- How are marshmallow frogs adapted to live in their desert habitat?

Out of the Ark Music

MUSICALS

Mega, Mighty Minibeasts

A joyful, science-rich musical that brings learning to life for early years and KS1, while making production planning refreshingly straightforward for teachers



AT A GLANCE

- **Musical for ages three to seven**
- **Catchy songs with built-in scientific learning**
- **Fully editable script with flexible casting**
- **Includes sound effects, Makaton videos and a dance video**
- **Packed with cross-curricular classroom activities**

REVIEWED BY: EMMA CATE THOMPSON

If you are looking for a musical that young children will absolutely adore while quietly reinforcing key learning, *Mega, Mighty Minibeasts* is a brilliant choice. Written for ages three to seven, this production strikes that perfect balance between being fun, memorable and genuinely educational, without ever feeling forced or heavy-handed.

The songs are an immediate highlight. They are incredibly catchy, perfectly pitched for the age group and full of personality. *We Are Minibeasts* is the kind of song that will be sung on the playground long after rehearsals have finished, and honestly, I'm not mad about it being stuck in my head for weeks. What I love most is that the lyrics cleverly repeat core facts about minibeasts, helping children retain key scientific knowledge. As we know, music is powerful for memory, and this musical makes the most of that in a really meaningful way.

The script itself is warm, funny and full of heart. It follows Ramble the centipede and her fellow forest creatures as they discover that being small does not mean being unimportant. Along the way, children are introduced to ideas around ecosystems, pollination and decomposition in a way that feels completely natural and accessible. There are laugh-out-loud moments, plenty of charm, and just the right amount of emotional depth for young performers.

As always with Out of the Ark, the practical support for teachers is exceptional. You get a clear character list, a fully editable script, and a detailed props list, all designed to be adapted to suit your cohort. There are 24 speaking parts, but roles can easily be expanded or reduced, making it flexible whether you are working with one class or several. Nothing needs inventing or rewriting. Everything is ready to go.

The online platform is intuitive and easy to navigate. Lyrics can be displayed on the interactive whiteboard, audio tracks are simple to access, and there are even sound effects for certain minibeasts, which adds a lovely extra layer to the performance. Beyond the musical itself, the additional resources really shine. The minibeast trail document is packed with ideas for outdoor learning, role play and exploration, while worksheets and profiles can be used in class or sent home. The inclusion of Makaton signing videos, dance videos and downloadable backdrops makes the production feel genuinely inclusive and thoughtfully planned from start to finish.

Overall, *Mega, Mighty Minibeasts* is a joyful, well-thought-through production that children will remember long after the final song. It brings learning and performance together in a way that feels natural, engaging and genuinely fun.

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VERDICT

- ✔ **A joyful musical that children genuinely love performing**
- ✔ **Songs that reinforce scientific learning through repetition**
- ✔ **Flexible casting that works for any cohort size**
- ✔ **Excellent additional resources for classroom learning**
- ✔ **A stress-free production package for busy teachers**

UPGRADE IF...

You want a fun, inclusive musical for younger children that supports science learning, keeps pupils engaged, and gives teachers everything they need without adding to workload.

MUSICALS

The School Musicals Company: Grimm

A crowd-pleasing musical that provides an interesting twist on the Grimm brothers and some of their most familiar tales

AT A GLANCE

- **Suitable for ages 9 – 11**
- **Comprehensive booklet providing a full script, song lyrics and sheet music**
- **Includes detailed staging and casting notes**
- **Audio files featuring vocal and non-vocal versions of each song**
- **Provides a positive finale to primary school life**

REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES

You don't need me to tell you that the transition from primary to secondary school is a significant milestone for children. Behind them lie the days of innocence and magical tales. Ahead lie the challenges and triumphs of the teenage years and adulthood. Added together, they make the core theme of this new musical by the wonderful School Musicals Company particularly astute, as it combines nostalgia for fairytales with the idea of being able to write the ending to your own story.

'Imagine a world where the villains always win…' begins the synopsis (right now, it doesn't feel like that takes much imagination, but do go on!). The premise of this musical is that the famous Grimm brothers – the collectors and creators of so many of the most familiar stories in the European tradition – have not yet embraced the concept of happy endings. But that is about to change thanks to the intervention of a magic quill, some well-known characters and the brothers' independent-minded assistant.

In essence, the Grimms indulge the villains of their pieces by writing stories in which the bad guys get all the breaks: Prince Charming marries an ugly sister, Hansel gets devoured by the witch, and Rumpelstiltskin runs off with the Queen's baby. However, some of the characters of their stories, especially the peripheral ones, join forces to confront the writers. Somewhat reluctantly, they give joyful endings a go and embrace the idea of happy-ever-afters.

This production will present Upper Key Stage 2 children with something a little more challenging than they might be used to. Then again, as they will have likely just finished SATs, they may well be feeling fairly invincible. What's more, the script is packed with lively dialogue and good gags, including the sort of digs at staff that only those who are about to leave the school could get away with. And, as you might expect, the Grimm-grim homophone gets plenty of punishment – if Jack had milked his cow as exhaustively, she wouldn't have been worth a bean.

But, let's face it, what really brings a soppy smile to the faces of the proud parents is the sight of their no-longer-so-little treasures singing their hearts out. And, as fans of The School Musicals Company will be well aware, they do have an admirable knack of writing bespoke songs that hit that sweet spot where originality meets accessibility and a vague sense of familiarity (I'm still trying to remember what the music to *Believe in Yourself* reminds me of). Tastes differ and everyone will have their own favourites – I was particularly taken by *We're Cooked* – but these tunes are bound to get feet tapping and hearts glowing.

Busy and no-doubt-exhausted Year 6 teachers will be delighted to know that the production pack includes sheet music and three recorded versions of each song: one performed by children, one as a backing track and the other as incidental music. There is also a comprehensive booklet packed full of handy support materials such as a scene breakdown, character profiles and staging suggestions, as well as a full script (an editable version of which can be obtained for a small charge). All that's left for you to do is get them to remember their lines and SPEAK UP in order to earn a happy ending of your own.

teach PRIMARY

VERDICT

- ✔ Lively script
- ✔ Catchy, original songs
- ✔ Named parts for 42 children
- ✔ Well resourced
- ✔ Reduces the stress of staging a show

UPGRADE IF…

You want to put on a triumphant production to celebrate the culmination of the pupil's primary journey.

Book and downloads – £39.95; books and CD – £39.95; performance licence – £38.00; editable script – £9.95
theschoolmusicalscompany.com

Q&A

We take the famous Proust questionnaire and pose eight of its questions to a fellow educator. Take a peek into the deepest depths of a teacher's soul...

1 What is your idea of perfect happiness in your job?

I've been fortunate to have lots of amazing experience in education. However, I don't think anything tops the face of a child when they 'get' something for the first time. Now I get a similar satisfaction from seeing the adults I work with developing and progressing in their careers.

2 What is your greatest fear at work?

As a dyslexic person, I don't love being put on the spot to write or spell things. I'm the guy in the group task who is very happy to take the microphone and report back to a whole room of people... but please don't hand me the flipchart pen!

3 What is your current state of mind?

I'm a pretty positive person. As I'm writing this, the first days of spring sunshine have arrived, so that certainly helps. I have, however, reached the age wherein some of the latest education developments just feel like regurgitations of things I remember as a young teacher!

4 What do you consider the most overrated teacher virtue?

Playing the piano! Now, don't get me wrong, playing the piano is an amazing talent, but I would suggest that it is not key for all primary teachers. I once served on an interview panel, and the head who was chairing the panel was determined to recruit someone with both a first-class honours degree *and* at least grade 6 on the piano. I'm glad I was on the interviewing side of the table, as I would have been ruled out on both counts!

5 On what occasion do you lie to your class?

As a young teacher, I really tried not to... but it definitely crept in over the years. I remember speaking to the whole school at assembly about a violin (in its case) that had been damaged in the playground. I told the children that I could see on the CCTV who was responsible and I would like the person in question to do the decent thing and own up. Now, the CCTV was so poor that a family of polar bears could have been in the playground and you wouldn't be able to spot them. At break time, six different children came to confess. I am still none the wiser as to who the real culprit was!

6 Which words or phrases do you most overuse with your class?

I'm in classrooms less and less, but when I was a 'real' teacher, my filler word was probably 'right'. It wasn't an angry or frustrated 'right'. It was a pondering 'right' as, in my head, I meandered onto the next point.

"Some of the latest education developments just feel like regurgitations"

7 What do you consider your greatest teaching achievement?

A number of years ago, in a work context, I happened upon an adult whom I had taught as a five-year-old. I was genuinely humbled by how much they remembered of their experiences in my classroom. They recalled even small details with fondness. I just about held my tears back until they asked if I would give them a hug. We should never forget that we leave deep impressions on young hearts and minds.

8 What is your most treasured teaching possession?

I still have the pocket dictionary that my older sister gave me when I started university. It travelled with me from job to job throughout my career. Although it has now been retired out of the bag I carry every day, the inscription in it – *What a joy it is to find the right word for the right occasion* – still reminds me that we must always choose our words carefully.

NAME: Alan Shields
JOB ROLE: Former headteacher, now Local Authority education manager
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