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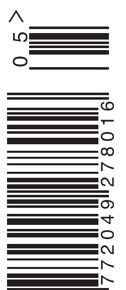

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FROM THE EDITOR

"Welcome...

"The government will ban access to social media for all children under the age of 16."

And with those words, Prime Minister Keir Starmer ended a two decade-long experiment in seeing what happens when children and young people are exposed to a barely mediated torrent of media from across the globe reflecting the totality of human experience – from its most rarefied highs, down to its most degenerate and obscene lows. Or did he?

Because it could be argued that removing children's ability to post, like, share and subscribe is a way of being seen to do something substantive about cyberbullying, Instagram-fuelled anxiety and ideological radicalisation, but without getting bogged down in, y'know, *thorny stuff*. Like making the case for robust content moderation, enforced by an online media regulator with real teeth. Or levying financial sanctions with genuinely unpleasant consequences for a tech titan's bottom line. Or asking deeper, more probing questions about whether *the behaviour of adults* might have had a part to play in why social media has come to be seen as such a perilous place for young minds.

If enacted, the ban would exclude under 16s from TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, X, Bluesky and YouTube (though YouTube Kids will be exempt – our thoughts and feelings go out to all the teachers now contemplating the prospect of changing the content settings on every video explainer and revision aid they've ever uploaded).

Schools would then have to teach and supervise cohorts of children and teens for whom social media, rightly or wrongly, has come to play a central role in their lives. Wrenching that away from them will inevitably have repercussions in the classroom, playground and corridors. It might prompt a few enterprising Y11s to give some Y8s a go on their phones outside the school gates, charging them access by the minute. It might result in something far worse.

In the best case scenario, we could be at the early stages of a steady cultural shift that eventually sees social media treated the same way as driving, marriage, consuming alcohol and joining the Armed Forces – activities and life choices that are commonplace, but which all entail some form of risk and/or a certain level of maturity to navigate safely.

Alongside that could be an admission that letting teens carve out their own social spaces online, at a time when real-world youth services have been in precipitous decline, and then promptly shutting those spaces down demonstrates a certain callousness. Starmer's announcement speech went on to mention that the government is "*Also investing in music, culture, art, sport – all those activities that we know are so important to childhood.*" Let's hope that comes to pass for today's children and teens, because we owe them at least that much.

Enjoy the issue,

Callum Fauser
callum.fauser@theteachco.com

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Andy Lewis is a deputy headteacher and teacher of RE

Ama Dickson is a maths teacher

Kal Hodgson is an assistant vice principal

Terri Bottriell-Wyse is headteacher of a special school

Gordon Cairns is an English and forest school teacher

Beverly Clarke MBE is an education consultant, speaker and author

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

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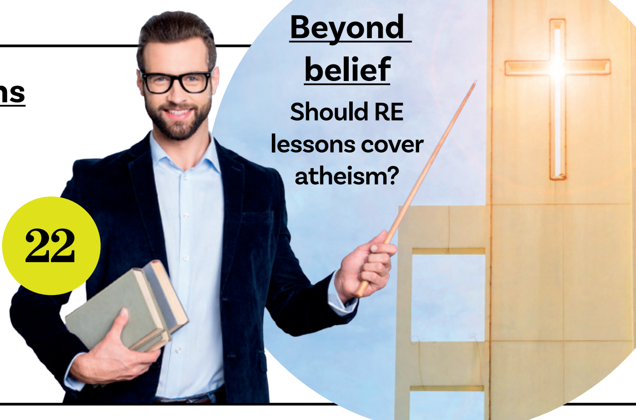

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teach SECONDARY

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IGNITE CURIOSITY IN STEM

Inspire your students with hands-on activities, interactive galleries, historic working machinery and special exhibitions at the Science and Industry Museum, Manchester.

Plan your group visit at
scienceandindustrymuseum.org.uk/groups

The newsletter

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

The UNINFORMED *teacher's guide to...*

BURGER MUSIC

It's surprising how few punchy epithets there are for pop music that's not very good. 'Muzak' gets close, but has a more specific meaning (that being the vapid, nothing-y music that once used to fill space in shopping malls and lifts, long since displaced by standard pop fare serving the same purpose). 'Pop pap' certainly counts, but makes those using it come across as ageing, uptight, supercilious bores. 'Burger music'? Heh, *now* you're talking...

It's a term that's been steadily gaining a foothold in online music discourse, having first emerged from hip-hop circles. In the broadest sense, it can be understood to mean 'bad music', but opinions differ as to *how* said music is bad. It's sometimes used interchangeably with 'coworker music' to describe the insufferable stuff your colleagues insist on playing in the office, For others, it's a successor to 'basic' – mainstream, obvious music that's a bit cringe.

It's early days yet, but those differing interpretations suggest that 'burger music' as an insult could have legs. And it's perhaps the perfect descriptor to keep on hand for when the top 40 consists entirely of AI-generated simulacra of yesterday's pop hits. After all, what could be more 'burger music' than bland slurry of dubious origin that's nonetheless proved to be bafflingly popular...

DO SAY
"Coldplay is burger music."

DON'T SAY
"Burger is cold. Music play!"

BEAT THE BUDGET

What are we talking about?
The BounceTogether Toolkit

Who is it for?
Senior mental health leads

What's on offer?
Free access to a suite of online wellbeing tools, including wellbeing audits, survey resources, planning support, a wellbeing calendar and classroom-ready resources. Users also get to periodically claim and keep one of BounceTogether's paid-for lessons and accompanying resources (pictured).

Where is it available?
tools.bouncetogether.co.uk

WHAT THEY SAID...

"6 in 10 young people who are NEET today have never had a job, up from 4 in 10 in 2005... We are at risk of a lost generation."

Former minister Alan Milburn, writing in the foreword to the Department for Work & Pensions' 'Young people and work: interim report'

Think of a number...

466,300

The number of teachers employed across England's state schools – down by over 1,900 compared to last year

Source: DfE 'School workforce in England' census

538,547
The number of pupils at schools in England who have an Education, Health and Care Plan – up 11.6% on the 2025 figure

Source: DfE

4,630
The number of children in England with multi-sensory impairment (MSI) needs in 2024/25 – at a time when 54% of local authorities employ no trained MSI teachers

Source: Sense

ONE FOR THE WALL

"Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to a mind when it has once seized on it like a lichen on a rock."

Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

U16 social media ban reactions

Keir Starmer has announced that the government will take steps to deny under 16s access to social media networks. Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, X and Facebook will be included within the ban, though WhatsApp, Signal and YouTube Kids won't be. So how did some familiar figures and organisations react...?

"A ban on social media for under-16s will only be effective if it is workable and properly enforced. Schools cannot be left to police the online world or carry responsibility for failures by tech companies."
– Matt Wrack, NASUWT General Secretary

"We need to reset the debate – from banning children to banning the companies who fail to show that their services protect children's safety and wellbeing. My position remains that any online service that uses harmful features should be banned from accessing under-18s unless and until it can prove it is safe."
– Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza

"For too long, Big Tech companies have designed systems that hook children early, keep them online for as long as possible and profit from their attention – even when it exposes them to harm. This decision is a necessary step towards stopping that exploitation."
– Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the NEU

"Blanket bans push kids out of curated, supervised, beneficial experiences and towards anonymous, less-safe services."
– Statement issued by YouTube

SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

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

THE SPEECH:

Education Secretary addresses Education World Forum

WHO? Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education
WHERE? Education World Forum, London
WHEN? 18th May 2026

"We are building a system in which children grow up together, go to their local school together, achieve and thrive together. We're introducing layered support in our schools to meet a much wider range of needs. Universal support available for all children. Targeted help through Individual Support Plans and specialist provision for children who need it.

We're backing these changes with investment to make mainstream schools more inclusive. £1.6 billion for an inclusive mainstream fund. £3.7 billion to develop inclusion bases, improve accessibility and create new special school places. £200 million to train staff and a £1.8 billion fund for our 'Experts at Hand' service – a bank of professionals that schools can call upon to help their students, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and occupational therapists too.

Because all children benefit from that inclusive approach, not just children with SEND. And our country will benefit too. By drawing from a deeper and wider pool of talent, we'll make our country not just fairer but stronger. By sending our children to school together, we'll make our country not just stronger, but kinder.

Children growing up side-by-side with classmates who have different needs, different ideas, different talents – that's the recipe for a society more welcoming of difference, more settled, more comfortable with who we are. Because we can't have a strong and inclusive society without a strong and inclusive education system."

THE RESPONSE:

ASCL comments on natural history GCSE

FROM? Pepe Di'Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders
REGARDING? The government's launch of a consultation on plans to introduce a new natural history GCSE qualification
WHEN? 11h June 2026

"This new GCSE reflects the strong interest and concern of young people in the natural world at a time when it faces many threats, from a changing climate to sustainability and conservation challenges.

However, schools will need sufficient numbers of teachers, and time and space within a crowded curriculum, to be able to do deliver this new qualification – and these are commodities that are in extremely short supply. Nevertheless, we are keen to work with the government, Ofqual, and the exam boards on making this a reality."

SAVE THE DATE

7 JULY 2026 UK Festival of Play | 2-3 JULY 2026 Festival of Education | 3 JULY 2026 nasen LIVE 2026

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

The annual UK Festival of Play is organised by trade body Ukie's 'Digital Schoolhouse' outreach initiative and game publisher Electronic Arts. Billed as a 'creative computing conference' aimed at 9- to 14-year-old, it takes place across five UK locations this summer, concluding on 7th July. Visitors will get to meet industry professionals, learn about the tech behind video game development and get hands-on with some of the creative tools used by the pros.

2-3 JULY 2026
Festival of Education
Wellington College, Berkshire,
educationfest.co.uk

Back for a 16th year, The Festival of Education will once again be welcoming visitors to Wellington College for two days of discussions, seminars, debates, networking and CPD. As past attendees will know, the event boasts a uniquely relaxed atmosphere, with a vibe closer to that of the Hay Festival than 'conference venue', and a packed agenda featuring some 300 workshops, presentations and speeches.

3 JULY 2026
nasen LIVE 2026
Vox Conference Venue, NEC Birmingham
tinyurl.com/ts154-NL2

At a time when expectations around inclusion are very much in a state of flux, school staff will find plenty of helpful advice and food for thought at nasen's annual gathering. Visitors will get to hear direct from notable SEND luminaries, pick up tips on best practice, network with professional peers and explore an extensive SEND exhibitor showcase.

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ARE YOU SMARTER THAN A

STONE AGE ENGINEER?

A new podcast exploring the maths and engineering behind Stonehenge.

Turn big historical questions into practical STEM learning.

TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

No, not that way...

It was a cold and frosty morning, on a day that would soon see four successive lessons of cross country running. The course was marked out on a large area of scrubland adjacent to the school and flanked by residential houses.

The first Y8 run didn't go entirely to plan, since a significant number of pupils were extremely late in returning, complaining that they'd got lost. To avoid further issues, I was dispatched to a central viewing point on the course from where I'd be able to direct the runners as needed.

I was kitted up for running, but as I was going to be fairly stationary, I also wore a long green overcoat to keep warm. Thus prepared, I went to my designated station.

However, the sight of a man in a mac apparently wearing no trousers (to be clear, I was wearing shorts) while watching boys and girls running around perhaps understandably alarmed a resident in one of the houses who promptly phoned the police, who in turn contacted the school to express their concerns.

Consequently, a series of directional arrows were hastily made and placed around the course so as to avoid any further misunderstandings...

Time to go?

My task during most morning break times was to patrol the 'out of bounds' areas of the school grounds. One morning, I encountered a young female and immediately asked her why she was in an out of bounds area, and why she was wearing a plain black jumper that lacked the school's logo. *"Oh, I'm sorry,"* she replied. *"I didn't think those rules applied to supply teachers..."*

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

A FEW MINUTES OF DESIGN

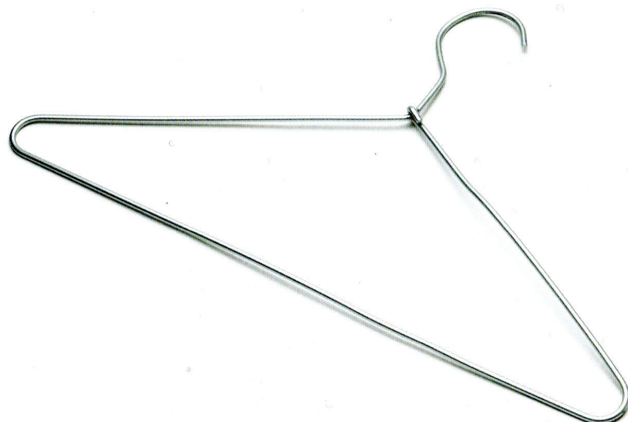
#41 ONE OBJECT, 100 WAYS

Draw as many uses as you can think of for the object below.

What qualities or properties, does the object have? How else could these properties be used?

You can multiply the basic unit, add materials, cut the object or reshape it.

You just need to make good use of the shape, size and properties of the material.



Get Into Film

Into Film has announced that it will be expanding its learning offer for schools – which includes film education, media literacy services and screen careers support – having recently secured £12.99 million of BFI National Lottery funding over the next three years.

The organisation plans to use the funding to expand its support for teachers, widen access to creative learning opportunities and help more young people from under-represented and underserved backgrounds build confidence, creativity and future career skills through storytelling, film and digital media.

Fiona Evans, CEO of Into Film, commented: *"At a time when schools are helping young people understand AI, digital media and an increasingly fast-changing world, creative skills, media literacy and access to the creative industries have never mattered more.*

"We now work with more than two-thirds of UK schools, helping children and young people develop critical thinking and future career skills through storytelling, film and digital media. We are so grateful to the BFI and all our industry match funding partners who make this possible.

This investment will help ensure that more young people, regardless of who they know or where they come from, can access high-quality creative learning, see pathways into screen careers and tell their own stories."

For more information, visit intofilm.org

Like and subscribe

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

Mr Kerry @Mr_Kerry_C
My ITT student went for an ECT post interview today. They offered her the job. BUT, no £ to fund ECT, so 2 years as instructor & then ECT after that. I am appalled that a huge MAT would do this to a brand new teacher!

Jan Rowe @Janroweljmu
Today I ran into an ex PGCE student from a course I lead . First question I always ask these days - "are you still teaching"? She's now a mum with 2 young children. Answer, "yes, but I'm struggling. It's no longer the job I went into, it's changed completely." Hear this a lot...

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and @teachsecondary.bsky.social

Academy 21
The Online Alternative Provision Experts

Supporting Confident Transitions in Secondary School

Transition points in secondary education can have a lasting impact on a young person's confidence, engagement and future outcomes. The move from Year 6 to Year 7 can be particularly challenging, while transitions between years and a focus on preparing for life after school can affect confidence, engagement and attendance.

Supporting pupils from Year 7 and beyond

Academy21 works alongside secondary schools to provide DfE-accredited short-term, tailored support that complements existing pastoral and academic provision. Delivered online in flexible, structured blocks, our Online Alternative Provision helps pupils build confidence, resilience and academic stability without disrupting their wider school experience.

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Visit: academy21.co.uk/transition
Talk to us: contact@academy21.co.uk
DfE Number: 000/1004

Department for Education
Accredited Provision

David Voisin is a head of MFL

DICTIONARY DEEP DIVE

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

PARDON MY FRENCH

An orator once mocked his opponent's 'cafeteria rhetoric,' accusing them of choosing arguments '*à la carte*' ('*carte*' in this instance, meaning 'French menu'). '*Carte blanche*' (literally 'white card'), meanwhile, comes from the idea of receiving a blank document and having full freedom to fill it in. The word 'carton' derives from the French word for cardboard, referring to the material originally used for the container.

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Many writers, from Charles Dickens to George Orwell, have championed a kind of 'purity' in English that favours plain, Germanic words over what they've seen as more elaborate or pretentious Latin-derived alternatives. Yet this view underestimates the extent to which Latin influences have shaped the language.

More than 80% of English polysyllabic words have Latin roots. Latin entered English in several waves, beginning in the early medieval period and continuing through the Renaissance, when it re-emerged as the language of scholarship, science, and philosophy. Perhaps the most significant pathway for Latin vocabulary, however, was through French. Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, French (itself heavily Latin-based) became the language of the ruling classes in England, thus enriching English with a vast layer of Latinate vocabulary.

Thanks to this dual heritage, English can be thought of as frequently offering 'Two words for the price of one', with many everyday Germanic words coexisting with more formal Latinate synonyms. See 'teen' and 'adolescent', or 'freedom' and 'liberty', for example. This interplay becomes even more striking in grammar and word formation. 'Tooth', for instance, is Germanic, but its adjectival form shifts to the Latinate 'dental.' Similar patterns appear across scientific and technical language, as 'lung' becomes 'pulmonary,' 'heart' becomes 'cardiac' and 'skin' becomes 'cutaneous'.

This phenomenon – where related forms emerge from different linguistic roots – is known as *lexical suppletion*, and is a distinctive feature of English that highlights its richness and complexity.

TEACHING TIP: HAVE WE GOT NEWS FOR THEM?

Newspaper articles can often be overlooked as a rich source of vocabulary development. Research suggests they contain a remarkably high number of rare words, working out at around 68 per 1,000 words on average – more than is commonly found in books written for adults, over twice the amount in children's literature and around *four times* the number typically used in everyday adult conversations.

Newspaper articles also provide opportunities to explore how language can shape meaning and influence opinion. The terms 'collateral damage' and 'civilian deaths', for example, describe similar events, but produce very different emotional responses. Examining such word choices can help students better understand bias, persuasion and the power of language.

Newspapers can form the basis of practical classroom activities, such as tasking students with creating suitable headlines, reordering sentences , summarising key points, identifying themes or answering comprehension questions. Students can also use newspapers to compare reports of the same event from different sources.

SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS

Ambulatory means being able to move under one's own power

A pre**amble** is an introduction that helps you walk ahead of the main plot

A somn**ambul**ist is someone who moves while asleep

Do the numbers ADD UP?

Dave Clements questions what's behind the seemingly precipitous rise in demand for SEN support of recent years...

The title of my new book, *The Crisis in the Classroom – How the special needs explosion is destroying education*, makes a bold claim, but there's substance to that claim.

I wrote it at the urging of a teacher who rightly thought that I, as an embattled SEN parent, wasn't getting the whole picture. He invited me to speak to a group of teachers, and I found that while many were doing what they could to support children like mine, they were struggling with both the level of demand and depth of need within their classrooms.

Some told me that they daren't speak up. A few did, and I gratefully quoted them in the book – but you don't have to be at the teaching coalface to see there's a crisis in the classroom, as anyone who's looked over the annual behaviour survey in the last few years, or read about the latest local authority under threat of bankruptcy over its growing SEN bill will attest.

No longer a niche

Despite being father to a boy diagnosed with autism and ADHD, I am myself sceptical about some of the claims being made about those conditions and other associated special needs. In the first chapter of the book I pose the question, '*Are they making it up?*' and follow that by asking '*Do we know what 'normal' is?*' in the second chapter.

That's because I remain far from convinced that everything we're being told really adds up. Doing the media rounds of different broadcasters to promote the book, I saw how each had their own particular spin on the subject – but what struck me most was how often interviewers would confide in me, both on and off air, that they or a family member had ADHD, or was awaiting an assessment for autism.

How has this become such a thing? Why is it no longer a niche concern for a small minority of parents who have come to accept that their child isn't just 'hard to handle', 'falling behind' or 'struggling to engage' with learning or other children, but that there's really something else going on?

Culture of suspicion

Visible indications of SEN can now be seen everywhere. It seems as though every other kid is regularly wearing noise-cancelling headsets, and that every other parent is worried that their child might have 'sensory issues'. As I explore in the book's first chapter, everywhere you look there's another celebrity talking about how '*Everything makes so much more sense*' since receiving their ADHD diagnosis.

To answer my own question, no – for the most part at least, these conditions aren't 'made up'. There genuinely *is* something about an autistic child that makes them different – indeed, more than different, as I've repeatedly pointed out to those who insist on celebrating that difference.

> "Mental health and neurodivergent conditions are inherently fuzzy and uncertain"

A child with what we used to call Asperger's, or high-functioning autism will be very different to a child who has never spoken a word, but makes verbal sounds and exhibits unpredictable movements. Both of have autism, a clear special need and may well struggle on a daily basis, but in very different ways.

Yet the discussion of such conditions – both across the wider media and amongst those who imagine themselves to be more well-informed and 'aware' – runs the risk of creating a culture of suspicion and disbelief, rather than one based on tolerance and understanding.

Pathologising ourselves

Is it really the case that over a million of us in England, children and adults, are autistic? Or that more than 2 million of us have something called ADHD, even though the condition was barely being diagnosed at all just a few decades ago?

How is it possible that we're rapidly approaching 2 million of our children having special educational needs, and for over half a million of them to be on the EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plans) that are supposedly meant for children with only the most complex needs?

Is it really a coincidence that we're seeing growing issues with attendance, suspensions/exclusions, behaviour and a mental health crisis, just as more and more children in the nation's classrooms are being labelled as presenting with these 'neurodiverse' conditions?

There's a debate taking place right now into the widening of the categories used to diagnose ADHD and autism, as well as the usefulness of existing diagnostic approaches. That more and more of us are now being understood as in some way 'disordered' – and that we appear to be actively pursuing this pathologising of ourselves and our children – are clearly contributing factors to this explosion of needs. But those needs, if not always the categories themselves, are real enough, and genuinely troubling for those affected.

Fuzzy and uncertain

Mental health and neurodivergent conditions are inherently fuzzy and uncertain, with any such diagnoses inescapably subjective. That can be difficult to hear when you're seeking explanations and clarity as to why your child is acting as they are, but we should still be sceptical and be prepared to exercise doubt when we're suddenly told that our kids have stopped being kids simply going through the usual life stuff to the point that one in five of them now have 'special' needs.

We need to stop looking inside our children's heads all the time, and perhaps start reflecting more on the roles we're playing in our children's lives. Yes, some of us may well need to accept that there is something 'wrong', and that if our children are to flourish, we'll require some form of specialist help.

Unfortunately, however, because our society and education system endorses a therapeutic view of every child's life experience, those families that actually require such support can find themselves on endless waiting lists in an increasingly crowded field, missing out on the assessments and referrals their kids badly need.

Massively over-subscribed

The system as it stands is massively over-subscribed, with not enough room on the therapist's couch for everyone. We should look to ourselves – as teachers, parents and adults – and ask what we could be doing better to help.

Schools are the key site of the SEN explosion, with teachers taking the brunt of its impact as they struggle to hold the attention of their increasingly disruptive classrooms. And yet despite this, the government has announced as part of its SEN reforms its intent to double down on 'including' kids with significant needs in mainstream schools and expecting teachers to cope with the fallout.

I'm not convinced this is going to work. Nor am I convinced that we are that much more 'aware' of what's going on than we were in the past. If anything, things have actually got much worse for our kids, with survey after survey showing how much more messed up and anxious they are compared to previous generations.

However unwittingly, it seems to me that we're letting them down. We're constantly expecting the 'experts' to step in, when really it's us who should be providing our children with the guidance and support they need. We can't lose sight of those kids with significant needs any more than we can their non-special peers.

There are no easy answers to any of this, but as I concede in the book's concluding chapter, we can't go on as we are.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dave Clements is a local government policy advisor and associate of the Education Forum at the Academy of Ideas

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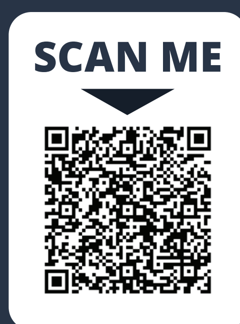

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If virtual reality technologies can help students experiencing mental health and wellbeing difficulties, that should be welcomed – but it shouldn't become a substitute for addressing the root causes of those difficulties...

Natasha Devon

There's a pilot scheme currently taking place that involves all 15 of the secondary schools across the London Borough of Sutton. A tech firm called Phase Space has donated virtual reality headsets to be used by pupils who are experiencing exam stress, difficult home lives or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Pupils will be allowed to access the VR programme for seven minutes during a pre-arranged time slot, or when they signal needing to leave a lesson because they feel overwhelmed. The experiment is being overseen by the local NHS mental health trust, and early indications have apparently been extremely positive. Some 90% of the young people using the technology across the first 10 schools joining scheme reported a drop in their stress levels, and the programme has reportedly led to improvements in both pupil attendance and behaviour.

Sticking-plaster solutions

I'm genuinely in two minds about this. On the one hand, I've long been in favour of allowing neurodivergent or anxious pupils limited periods of 'time out' from the classroom. There's good evidence to show that just having the option of temporary escape, even if it's not used, can reduce stress.

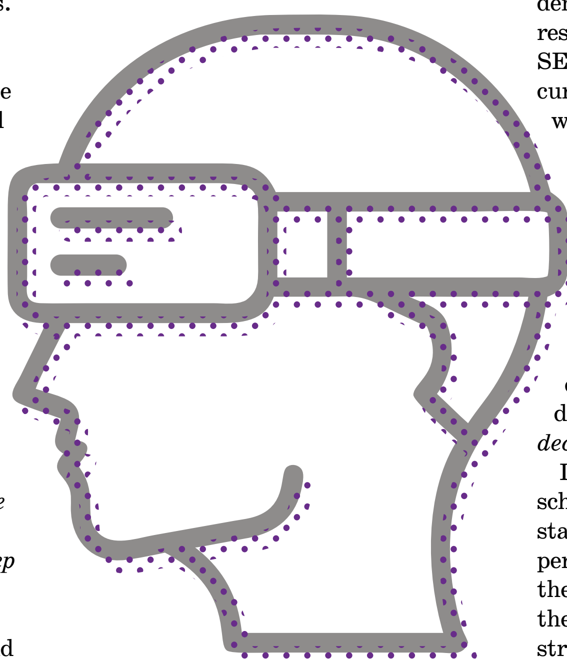
At the same time, however, these are the kinds of practical strategies offered to teachers as sticking-plaster solutions because the education system is straining under inadequate resourcing, no one has enough time to talk to each other and everything has become increasingly exam-focussed. As one teacher once put it to me, "*It feels like we're frantically slathering on layer after layer of factor 50 whilst they keep turning up the heat of the sun*."

VR has previously been used to distract children from the physical and emotional discomfort associated with painful or invasive medical procedures, which begs the question – why has their school experience become comparable to that?

A temporary escape

There's also a danger in this kind of thing being seen as a panacea. According to 73 studies published by the National Institutes of Health, VR can sometimes worsen anxiety symptoms and cause feelings of disorientation among some users. Experiments conducted at the University of Rochester have cautioned that, '*Users can immediately feel dizziness, nausea or eye strain after using the headset. A few individuals who have worn VR headsets extensively every day have reported lasting eye damage due to the technology*'. (see tinyurl.com/ts155-ND1)

It's also right to question the wisdom of relying on technology to solve mental health issues. Do we really want to see young people retreating ever further into online environments because they're considered to be safer than reality? One could argue that VR simply provides a temporary escape for children who need it, no different from the books famously devoured by Roald Dahl's Matilda.



Yet the aforementioned University of Rochester research goes on to note how, in VR environments, '*Users may encounter situations that blur the lines between reality and simulation, creating a problematic environment. The lack of clear boundaries and consequences within virtual reality experiences can pose serious risks to users' physical and psychological wellbeing*.'

Rearranging the deckchairs

I might be letting the perfect be the enemy of the good here, but I can't help but feel that what schools need – and have long needed – are policies which attract more well-qualified teachers and support staff, reduce workload demands, generate more funding and resourcing (especially for specialist SEND support) and produce a curriculum that re-prioritises activities with proven therapeutic value, such as sports, art, music and drama.

Anything else feels like rearranging the deckchairs on the *Titanic*.

In reality, the opposite is happening. As of April 2026, two-fifths of school leaders in England have reported being forced to cut back on SEND support, due to a financial crisis they describe as being '*More than a decade in the making*'.

I fear for a future where I'll enter a school, only to discover that pupils and staff alike have VR devices strapped permanently to their faces, because the reality of the environment in which they find themselves has become too stressful to bear.

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

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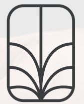

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For decades, our nominally 'comprehensive' admissions system has been stymied by social inequalities – we know what the solutions are, we just need the political will to do better...

Melissa Benn

Five years ago, families living in some of the large public housing estates in Brighton and Hove decided to challenge what they saw as the exclusion of their children from educational opportunity. So began Class Divide (classdivide.co.uk) – a group that has since campaigned to '*Create a socially inclusive education system... changing the policies and structures that prop up the status quo.*'

Their central complaint concerns local school admissions, and how different schools go about deciding which pupils to admit.

Steep pecking order

Since the 1960s, England's school system has technically been non-selective (barring the continued existence of 160+ grammar schools), but in reality, the situation is much more complicated – particularly given an educational landscape in which schools are pitted against each other, and successive governments have been somewhat lax in monitoring how schools shape their intake.

Some schools enjoy inherent advantages, the most obvious example being schools situated in more affluent areas, where children are more likely to have had a head-start in life. This can, and has led to wealthier parents moving to areas with already high-achieving schools, thus entrenching this advantage yet further.

In other instances, families can gain priority access to certain schools on the grounds of their religious faith, or in some cases, due to their child being able to demonstrate some form of artistic aptitude.

The cumulative effect of this residential segregation, combined with labyrinthine admissions policies, has resulted in poorer children tending to congregate within certain schools and better off children in others, confirming what the great educationalist Tim Brighouse once described as "*A dizzyingly steep pecking order*" of institutions within the country's nominally comprehensive system.

Necessary moves

There have been some previous attempts at legislating for greater fairness via the school admissions code, such as the introduction of priority admissions for children in care and those with SEND. These were necessary moves, but have barely touched upon the ongoing issue of segregation according to social class.

In 2014, however, the admissions code was changed to grant schools opportunities to '*Give priority to disadvantaged children in their admission arrangements*' – the first time that eligibility for free school meals or Pupil Premium was treated as a criterion in admissions arrangements. 10 years on, however, only 170 schools – a paltry 5% of the country's secondaries – have actually made use of this freedom.

Policymakers are therefore trying once again to address this 'elusive' problem. The influential Sutton Trust think tank, for example, recently proposed that schools give priority to PP pupils (see tinyurl.com/ts155-MB1).

Late last year, a Bristol University study roadtested three possible routes to change: prioritising admissions for FSM-eligible pupils; conducting a random ballot for a minority of school places (known as 'marginal ballots'); and a broad, test-based allocation known as banding (see tinyurl.com/ts155-MB2).

The Bristol study came out firmly in favour of the first option, arguing that all schools should take 15% of FSM children. The reasoning is that this would not only make secondary schools more socially inclusive, but as demonstrated by the study, involve minimal disruption for others in terms of school choice. It would also be a broadly cost-free measure, thus giving any willing government a way to reform and improve a key public service without the need for additional expenditure.

A barrier to fairness

Government ministers might also want to take closer look at the Brighton and Hove case where, thanks to five years of campaigning efforts by Class Divide and others, community schools in the area now prioritise FSM-eligible pupils and operate an 'Open Admissions' system, through which families may apply for a limited number of places outside their catchment area.

Following the latest 2025/26 offers round, Class Divide reported that "*83% of families got their first choice of school and zero families were squeezed out,*" It also seems that local secondary schools are now allocating more places to children from the area's three public housing estates. (see tinyurl.com/ts155-MB3)

If the lessons highlighted by Class Divide and the proposals put forward by the Bristol study were put into practice more widely, we could begin breaking down one of the biggest barriers to fairness in the education system and, as the study notes, '*Increase the life chances*' of those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It would also be a vital step towards restoring the original comprehensive mission.

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

Culture shift

Anthony David considers whether the increasing presence of AI within schools is starting to affect students' classroom behaviour...

There's a quiet shift happening in classrooms. It's not being driven by a new policy, revised curriculum or behaviour framework. It's being shaped by something less visible, yet far more pervasive – students' day-to-day interactions with artificial intelligence.

For secondary teachers, the question is no longer whether students are using AI. They are. The more important question is what kind of behaviours AI is reinforcing, and whether those behaviours align with the habits we're trying to build in classrooms.

> "If students feel successful without effort, the link between hard work and achievement becomes blurred"

'Frictionless learning'

At its best, schooling is about developing independence, resilience and the ability to think critically. AI, however, tends to prioritise speed, ease and accessibility, giving rise to a tension that now sits at the heart of a growing cultural challenge.

That said, it would be unwise to view AI as simply a threat. If used well, it has the potential to support explanation, extend thinking and provide timely feedback. The issue is less AI's presence, so much as the habits it quietly encourages.

A key part of AI's appeal is that it removes effort. A student can generate an essay plan in seconds, summarise a text instantly or receive a model answer without struggling through the process. Access to support isn't the issue, since teachers have always scaffolded learning. The problem lies with the removal of productive struggle.

In a Y9 history lesson, for example, a teacher might ask students to interpret a source and build an argument. Traditionally, this would involve some degree of uncertainty, trial and error, and discussion. With AI, a student can bypass that whole process and produce a polished response that appears secure, but which isn't rooted in their own understanding.

The behaviour being reinforced here is subtle, yet significant. Why persist, when the answer is immediately available? Why wrestle with difficulty, when clarity can be generated on demand?

There is a more positive pathway here, though. When guided carefully, AI can be used to model approaches, generate alternative perspectives or support revision. The difference lies in whether the student is thinking first and using AI to refine, or outsourcing their thinking altogether.

The illusion of competence

AI can also create a false sense of progress. When a student submits work that has been heavily supported or generated by AI, it can look impressive – the vocabulary is elevated and the structure coherent, with minimal errors.

Underneath, however, there may be very little actual learning taking place.

This creates a motivational trap. If students feel successful without effort, the link between hard work and achievement becomes blurred. Teachers may start to notice students who appear confident, but who instantly struggle when asked to explain their thinking verbally or apply knowledge in unfamiliar contexts.

For a practical example of this, let's turn to the English classroom. A student produces a sophisticated paragraph analysing a character, but when asked to explain how they developed the idea, they can't. The written outcome suggests mastery, but the underlying understanding is fragile at best.

If used transparently, though, AI can support motivation in different ways. For students who struggle to get started, it can reduce barriers to entry and help to build their initial confidence (though the challenge then is for teachers is to ensure this early support gives way to independence, rather than supplanting it).

The 'yes-man' problem

Many AI tools are designed to be helpful, polite and affirming. They will rarely challenge the user directly, and are unlikely to say, '*This is wrong, and here is why.*'

In classrooms, of course, teachers do the opposite, since effective teaching relies on precise feedback, careful correction and an honest diagnosis of gaps in knowledge. If students spend significant time interacting with systems that validate, rather than challenge, they may become less receptive to critical feedback and less skilled at evaluating the quality of their own work.

At the same time, AI can be prompted to critique, identify errors or suggest improvements. The limitation isn't always the tool itself, but rather how it's used – though without explicit teaching, students will tend to seek confirmation more often than challenge.

Assisted dependency

There's a growing narrative that AI supports independent learning, and in some cases this is true. A well-guided student can use AI to extend their thinking, test ideas and receive immediate feedback, but in the absence of clear boundaries, this 'independence' can quickly turn into dependency.

In homework tasks, for example, students may come to rely on AI to generate responses, rather than use it to support their own thinking. They'll complete the task, but the learning acquired will be minimal. Teachers are then faced with a familiar, but amplified challenge – the work looks complete, but doesn't reflect the student's true understanding.

The key issue here isn't the presence of AI, but the absence of clarity around how it should be used. To that end, some high-performing systems – including Sweden and Finland – have begun to re-examine the role of digital tools in schools more broadly, placing greater emphasis on reading, writing and sustained attention. This shift in focus isn't a rejection of technology *per se*, but more a recognition that tech-enabled ease and speed can come at the expense of depth and resilience.

This reflects a similar concern emerging in many UK classrooms – that AI can offer immediate answers, but also reduce the need for sustained effort. Classroom behaviour is shaped by routines, expectations and the signals we send about what matters. If students experience one set of expectations in class that extol effort, honesty and persistence, and a different set through their use of AI – where the emphasis will be on speed, convenience and affirmation – then we're left with a tension.

Over time, this tension can erode classroom culture. Students may start to see effort itself as optional and prioritise completion over understanding. They may start to become less comfortable with feedback that challenges them.

This isn't a reason to reject AI, but more a reason for us to be explicit about the behaviours we want to protect and develop.

Strategies for resistance

So how should we respond to this? Students need to understand when and how AI can be used appropriately, which is why some schools have introduced simple frameworks. A three-point outline of such a framework might include:

- AI can be used to generate ideas, but final responses must be the students' own
- AI can be used to check grammar, but not to write extended responses
- Students should be able to explain any work they submit

Teachers can also design tasks that prioritise thinking over output. Oral questioning, live writing, timed responses and retrieval practice all make it harder for students to outsource their thinking.

Moreover, explicit teaching around AI is now essential. Students need to understand how these tools work and what their limitations and biases involve.

Finally, feedback remains central. Students need to regularly receive and act on precise, honest feedback in order to reinforce the value of accuracy and help counterbalance the affirming nature of many AI tools.

KEY THEMES AT A GLANCE

- AI reduces productive struggle, which can weaken resilience
- Polished outputs can mask gaps in understanding
- Students may develop an illusion of competence without secure knowledge
- AI often affirms rather than challenges, limiting exposure to honest feedback
- Without guidance, students can become dependent on AI tools
- Students must avoid prioritising completion over understanding
- Clear expectations for AI use must be established

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Anthony David is an executive headteacher based in North London and author of the 'AI & Me' PSHE series, aimed at giving young people the language and skills to navigate an AI world

Reasons to be CHEERFUL

Colin Foster argues that assuming the worst of your students can become a self-fulfilling prophecy...

Young people are similar to adults in that they come in a wide variety of different forms. Some are friendly, some are polite, some are hard-working. Some have problems, some seem to get into lots of conflicts and some are challenging. Much like teachers, really...

But I think there's a worrying trend in schools to assume the worst of young people. It's easy to see how this can happen in an era of high-stakes accountability, data scrutiny and relentless pressure. Teachers and leaders who assume the worst will never risk appearing foolish for being naïve, and never be ridiculed for being 'out of touch' or 'living in a fantasy land' where everything is wholesome and nice.

But assuming the worst isn't the 'safe option' at all. In fact, it does young people a great disservice.

Systemic assumptions

I'm mainly thinking here of various routines and processes that may *seem* helpful, but which unintentionally ascribe negative attributes to young people. For example, in many schools teachers will be told that there's a 'right way' to do cold calling, whereby the student's name is always said at the end. This means you mustn't say, "*Ben, what is a prime number?*" but rather, "*What is a prime number... [pause] Ben?*"

The thinking behind this is that if names come first, then only 'Ben' will be incentivised to listen to and think about the question that immediately follows – everyone else is off the hook. By contrast, keeping names at the end means that *everyone* has to think about the question, because anyone could be called upon to answer. It's a question formulation that keeps everyone on their toes, effectively in a state of low-level anxiety.

This is widely accepted as common sense. Who could object to the assertion that the second question structure is plainly better than the first? Yet it's important to carefully consider the assumptions that lie behind this rationale – particularly the assumption that *students are reluctant to think*. After all, it's not as if they care about their own learning. They're lazy, and will only take the trouble to actively consider something if they fear being put on the spot in a public setting, and the potential embarrassment of not being ready with an answer.

We all want high participation in our classrooms, of course, but our students' underlying motivations for taking part matter. Are we fostering a culture of genuine curiosity, or a culture of compliance driven by mild anxiety? When we rely on 'gotcha' tactics, we're sending out a subtle, yet clear message – '*I know you aren't interested. We are opponents in a battle and I'm determined to catch you out.*'

No doubt, there will be times when this approach is effective for certain students – but as a general rule, it feels like a very damning assumption to apply to the class as a whole. What has to have gone wrong for that to be the situation we're having to address each day?

> "Are we fostering a culture of genuine curiosity, or a culture of compliance driven by mild anxiety?"

I've heard some teachers defend this approach with words to the effect of, '*Well, I was like that when I was at school,*' or '*I can feel like that myself in PD sessions*' – but doesn't that say more about the speaker than the students they're teaching?

It's akin to saying, "*Well, I'd drive at 60mph in a 30mph zone if I could get away with it – wouldn't everyone?*" It feels awkward to say, "*No, that's just you; most people wouldn't.*"

The Golem effect

It's hard to object to people who assume the worst. If you expect nothing from your students then you'll never be disappointed. You'll seem *grounded,* and appear to be a *realist* who's worked in the toughest places and *knows how things really are*.

The trouble is, the more we assume the worst about the students we teach, the more that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Psychologists refer to this as the Golem effect – the evil twin of the Pygmalion effect – where low expectations lead to worse performance.

When we project suspicion, students will unconsciously internalise that and adjust their behaviour to meet our low baseline. We unwittingly work against the very values we wish to encourage, such as thoughtfulness, conscientiousness, curiosity and integrity.

Imagine a school where every student is assumed to be a potential thief. To avoid putting any temptation before them, all classrooms are locked at break times. A school with that kind of policy will most likely experience very few thefts – and that's a win, surely? There's less hassle, fewer fears around interactions with local police and everyone's happy.

Except that every student confronted by those locked doors will very quickly come to realise that they're being viewed as a potential criminal. What kind of

self-image are students likely to take away with them from a school like that?

It's unlikely that a new leader will commence their tenure by proposing "*Let's try unlocking some of the doors for a change*". They'd risk looking like a fool, with their subsequent downfall being just a matter of time. Similarly, anyone suggesting, "*Let's maybe **not** try to trick students into thinking we're asking them a question when we aren't*" is going to come across as having no idea just how workshy the average student really is.

But by holding such positions, what do we risk losing in the process?

How to pivot

I think that the act of assuming the worst is born out of fear. The teacher *fears* that if they believe in the students in front of them, those students may one day let them down. Believing in the students amounts to taking a risk, making it safer to simply assume the worst and prepare accordingly.

So let's devise a bulletproof system designed around managing the laziest, most awkward and/or ingeniously workshy student we can imagine. At least that way, our hypothetical student won't be able to hack their way out of the supervision we've built for them and our teacher won't end up being too emotionally invested in their outcomes.

We can certainly do that – but what about the majority of students who come to school hoping to actually learn something? Those students who, if we treat them well, want to work with us, rather than oppose us; those who aspire to be responsible citizens in the future, and perhaps even teachers themselves?

If we're not careful, these students will absorb the tacit assumption that '*No one puts any effort into anything unless they're trapped in a system that makes non-compliance harder than compliance*'. A system that effectively ensures no one reads a book unless checks are made to ensure that the reading has been completed. An environment in which no one would ever complete a piece of homework properly unless there's absolutely no way for them to cheat.

So how do we pivot? We can frame class questions in ways that invite collaboration, rather than spotlight inattention. We can create routines that assume students *want* to succeed and provide scaffolds in place of traps.

Let's stop planning for the worst, because doing so serves to inadvertently encourage it. Instead, let's muster up the courage to *plan for the best* – and then watch for how many of our students rise to meet those expectations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Colin Foster (@colinfoster77) is a Professor of Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University; for more information, visit blog.foster77.co.uk and bigmathematicalideas.org

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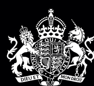

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of teachers in England spent less than a day, or no time at all, on formal CPD during the 2024/25 academic year

33%
of senior leaders believe that teachers' CPD needs are accurately identified by their school's leadership; 16% of teachers feel the same way

71%
of senior leaders believe that CPD contributes 'a great deal' or 'somewhat' to enhancing pedagogical skills – a view shared by 57% of teachers

Source: 'Teacher Development: The CPD Landscape in 2025' report produced by the Teacher Development Trust

3 TEACHWIRE ARTICLES FROM THE ARCHIVES

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Putting the pieces TOGETHER

Terri Bottriell-Wyse shares her thoughts on what mainstream schools can learn from the practice of special school settings

Inclusion can't be achieved through policy language alone. It requires immersion, collaboration and sustained professional development. SEND expertise must move from being a peripheral aspect of CPD to becoming a central component of teacher development.

Many schools are deeply committed to inclusion, but good intentions alone aren't enough. Staff need meaningful training and support to meet increasingly complex needs. As mainstream schools respond to growing levels of SEND, as well as the direction of travel suggested by recent government policy announcements, leaders must consider how they're going to prepare their staff to teach increasingly diverse cohorts in the years ahead.

Learn inclusion by living it

At present, many teachers feel underprepared and under-resourced. If we don't get SEND CPD right, then the gap between policy ambitions and classroom realities will only widen. The CPD in question can't be a single INSET session, followed by an expectation that staff will suddenly become SEND experts. The kind of expertise we're talking about here takes years to build.

This is why mainstream schools should increasingly learn alongside special schools. Not through one-off keynote talks, but through meaningful partnerships, shared practice and sustained professional learning. If we want teachers to become confident inclusive practitioners, they need opportunities to learn from those already immersed in this work every day.

SEND and inclusion are still not embedded deeply enough within initial teacher training. Theory matters, but practical immersion matters more.

All trainee teachers would benefit from spending meaningful time in a special school setting. In special schools, adaptive practice becomes instinctive because staff live it daily. Exposure develops confidence, communication skills, flexibility, insights into behaviour and relational practice in ways that traditional training alone simply can't.

The expertise exists

Some of the most powerful professional learning comes not from sitting in a training hall, but from working alongside children and experienced professionals. Watching, and then becoming part of co-regulation strategies with a significantly distressed young person with autism, for instance, is an experience that stays with you. You don't just learn cognitively; you *feel* it, reflect on it and grow through it. You learn from experienced colleagues around you, and equally through your own mistakes.

Those immersive experiences can shape teachers profoundly, with an impact that extends out far beyond pupils with identified SEND. Inclusive teaching improves learning for *all* children, because inclusive practitioners improve schools.

We already have extraordinary expertise within our education system. The challenge now is creating structures that will allow it to be shared well.

Special school practitioners, educational psychologists, therapists and inclusion specialists should all play a far greater role in system-wide professional development. Schools and local authorities need to think more creatively about how their CPD funding can be used. Rather than relying on generic training models, we should instead be investing in cross-setting collaboration, outreach partnerships, mentoring, coaching, shadowing and secondments.

Special schools shouldn't sit separately from mainstream education, but be active partners in school improvement. We should create professional learning communities, joint training opportunities and strategic outreach work that allows expertise to flow both ways.

I believe that if leaders haven't done so already, they

should consider working alongside specialist settings to review inclusion practice within their schools and identify any practical approaches that have already been proven to work elsewhere. Equally, of course, there's much that special schools can learn from their mainstream colleagues too. True collaboration is never unidirectional.

Investment matters

High-quality CPD requires investment, however – not just in terms of funding, but also time and capacity.

Perhaps the reason I value meaningful professional development so strongly is because of how much I've personally benefited from it throughout my career. I completed my teacher training through the old Graduate Teacher Programme supported by excellent mentors, but also while very much learning 'on the job'. Since then, I've completed a Master's degree and several professional qualifications, all supported by employers or various government initiatives.

What's mattered most, however, isn't simply having access to qualifications, but being able to work with leaders who gave me the time, encouragement and trust to make that learning meaningful. The best CPD changes practice, improves schools and ultimately benefits children.

Now, as a serving headteacher, I fully recognise the financial pressures that schools face. CPD is often one of the first areas to be reduced when budgets tighten, yet at a time when inclusion is becoming ever more central to educational reform, reducing investment in professional learning risks limiting schools' ability to improve sustainably.

We mustn't assume that inclusive practice can rely solely on goodwill. It requires protected time, professional trust and long-term commitment.

A change for the better

Despite the challenges ahead, we should approach this moment with a sense of optimism. The growing expectation that schools should become more inclusive is both morally and culturally important. Educators should – I hope – feel renewed purpose in helping to make that happen.

Professional learning is now more accessible than ever. Webinars, podcasts, online conferences, research communities and social media networks have opened up opportunities for staff to learn continuously and connect with others right across the sector.

Lifelong learning is something most educators both encourage and embody. Even after more than 24 years working in special education, I still learn something new every day.

Self-directed learning is hugely valuable, but works best alongside practical experience and collaboration. At the same time, however, we can't overlook how busy school staff already are. Professional development should inspire and support staff, not become yet another overwhelming form of pressure.

> **"The kind of expertise we're talking about takes years to build"**

Mentoring, coaching and wellbeing

This is where mentoring and coaching can be transformative. Some of the most impactful CPD happens through relationships. Coaching and mentoring allows staff to reflect, refine practice, build confidence and sustain resilience.

We rightly talk about needing to foster a sense of belonging and connection among our pupils, but professional connection matters enormously for staff too. I've been fortunate to be mentored by incredible people throughout my career and have seen others flourish after someone invested in their development.

As a headteacher, I've further benefited from external coaching during particularly challenging periods. Leadership can feel isolating at times, and cross-school support has never mattered more. These relationships create space not just for professional growth, but for improving our wellbeing and resilience too.

A shared journey

Inclusion work is emotionally demanding. As such, it's important for staff to be given opportunities to think, reflect and grow. When we invest in people properly, they remain in the profession long enough to turn their acquired knowledge into lasting impact for children.

If we want to see truly inclusive schools, we must first create truly inclusive professional learning.

There's a significant amount of SEND expertise within special schools across the country that we can draw on; as conversations around outreach and collaboration continue to grow, I hope that mainstream schools increasingly come to recognise special schools as partners and hubs of expertise.

I've seen first-hand just how powerful cross-school collaboration can be. In recent years I've been involved in developing a unique SEND provision within a mainstream school. Watching that provision evolve, and seeing the impact it's had on children and families has been an enormous privilege. All of us involved have been learning together as we go, which, in my opinion, is the best form of CPD there is.

It's my hope that more school staff will experience this kind of collaboration in the years ahead. Because if true inclusion is the destination that our education system is now ultimately heading for, I genuinely believe that has the potential to be hugely beneficial for us all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terri Bottriell-Wyse is headteacher of a special school and mainstream satellite provision, and founder of the consultancy service Wyse Inclusion, providing remote SEND training and mentoring to school leaders with practical, non-judgemental support; follow her at @wyseinclusion (Insta) and @terribwyse (LinkedIn)

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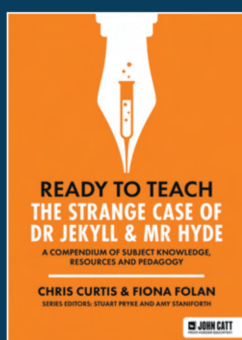

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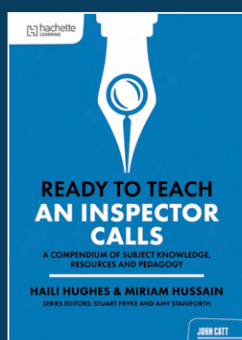

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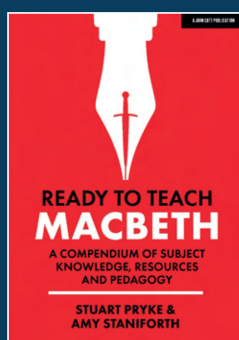

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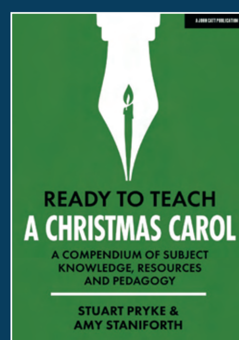

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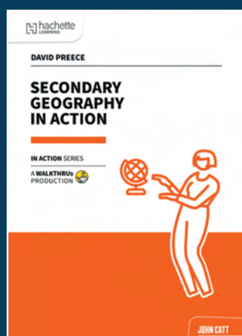

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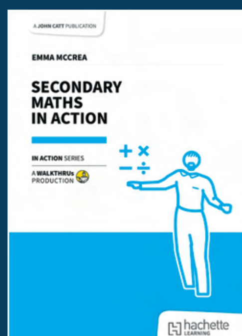

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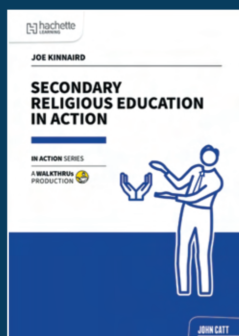

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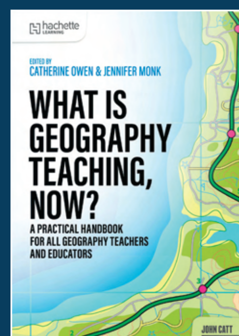

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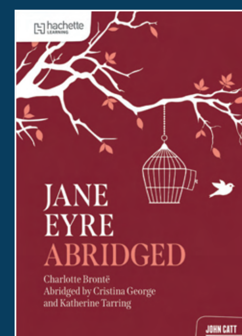

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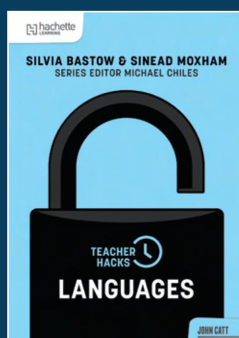

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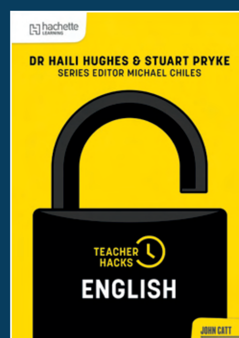

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'Is this thing on...?'

Beverly Clarke runs through the presentation 'don'ts' you should avoid during your next INSET day or CPD session...

Have you ever noticed how some people stand up to give a presentation and do so flawlessly, without any effort? I used to think '*Wow, how can they do that?*' – but then I learnt that giving a great presentation isn't about 'having the best slides' or managing to sound 'intellectual'.

Instead, it's all about establishing confidence, clarity and connection, and knowing how to engage your audience. Bring your authentic self to the presentation, since that's what your audience will ultimately remember – though that said, there are certain presentation pitfalls that everyone should avoid, including these...

Before the presentation

1. Prepare thoroughly. If possible, visit the room in which you'll be presenting ahead of time and try standing at different angles to where you'll be positioned. This will give you a better feel for what different audience members will be experiencing while you speak, and can still be a useful exercise even in rooms you're already familiar with.

2. Give your slides a consistent look. I personally favour a clear, white background for my presentation slides, as this keeps things simple and helps other colours – particularly my own brand colours – stand out more.

3. Keep your slides simple. Think of your slides as *visual support*, rather than lecture notes. Don't cram them with text – a few keywords, an image or two, a quote or maybe even an audio clip are all that's needed. Craft your presentation slides and then speak around them.

4. Don't use small fonts. Ensure that the text on your slides is clearly displayed in an accessible font style and point size. If you ever find yourself saying, '*I hope everyone can read that...*' then something's not right.

During the presentation

5. Avoid being 'flashy'. Animations, transitions and other graphical effects can occasionally enhance a presentation, but just as easily distract from the key messages you're trying to convey. You don't want to lose your audience.

6. Don't read from the screen. This creates distance between yourself and your audience. Instead, be human and tell a story; *talk to your audience*. Remember that your slides are a prompt, not a script.

7. Make eye contact. Think of your room as a clock. Move your eyes around the room to each 'digit' of this clock as you present and repeat the process throughout, so that you'll have directed your delivery to everyone in the room at least once. This can also help you pick up on body language cues that may indicate how your presentation is landing.

8. Avoid jargon. Education is full of acronyms. Even if your audience are all clued-in educators, though, be sure to use the full terms at least once before switching to the abbreviated forms thereafter – for example, 'Large Language Model' and then 'LLM'.

After the presentation

9. Don't overdo it with data. Simple, memorable stats work best, alongside key insights. Any data you share should serve a purpose; don't just share stats for the sake of sharing stats.

10. Avoid AI imagery. Try to inject some authenticity into your slides by using real imagery, video and audio. If you must use AI-generated content, at least be transparent about it and include a disclaimer for your audience.

11. Finish with a call to action. At the end, share your main intended takeaway and then invite audience questions. What's the one thing you want people to leave the presentation now knowing? Whatever the answer is, use that to craft your ending.

12. Rehearse. You can only get better at delivering presentations through practice, practice and more practice. As an educator, you'll know how important it is to reflect afterwards on your performance – so ask yourself, what went well? What would be your '*Even better if...*'?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Beverly Clarke MBE is an education consultant, speaker and author; to find out more, visit beverlyclarkeconsulting.co.uk

Leading without THE NOISE

Andrew Marsh explains why 'quiet leadership' is the form of strength that the education profession doesn't know it's missing...

The school bell rang at 8:55 am to signal the beginning of another day. By then, the eager children were already assembled on the playground, clutching their school bags, standing in straight lines beside their teachers. Behind them, a mass of parents gathered, chatting about nothing in particular, not quite ready to get on with their busy lives.

The door leading to the school office creaked open and out stepped a small man in his late fifties. He wore a grey suit and sported a red bow tie. The small man walked along the lines of children, as if inspecting his troops, before turning to address the parents. For several minutes, everyone listened in silence as the events of the next few days were outlined. The small man then turned and walked briskly back through the door into his office.

At that signal, the parents began filing out of the school gate, the children started leading into their classes and the day could begin.

A shock to the system

That was the morning ceremony that had taken place daily, for close to a century, before I arrived at the school as the new headteacher. It was a small village school dating back to Victorian times, and could certainly be described as 'traditional' in its ways. My presence was a bit of a shock to the system, at least for some, and it took a while before I was accepted into the community.

The practice of 'addressing the troops', as detailed above, was the first tradition I scrapped. Being a highly introverted person, there was no way I was going to put myself through that every day. I decided that I'd instead focus my social energies on those parts of the job that really mattered to me.

Had I been more like my predecessor, things would have undoubtedly been easier at the start, but I knew that I had to lead authentically if I was going to make my tenure a successful one. My style had its detractors, as well as some 'late adopters', but I came to see that being an introverted leader helped, rather than hindered me in creating a thriving, positive culture and building sustainable success.

Hard nuts to crack

Over the next 12 years, I led the school through some extremely challenging times – arguably among the most challenging our profession has ever seen.

I was lucky during the first few months of my time as headteacher that staff who didn't engage with my leadership style made the decision to look for employment elsewhere – though I use the term 'lucky' advisedly, since a fractured staff can still stall progress. In any case, the transition this prompted enabled me to build a team aligned with a new vision.

I'm sharing my own experiences now to give new headteachers the confidence to hold steady to their values, even during periods of dramatic change and upheaval. New headteachers I speak to are often encouraged when hearing about this part of my journey, and can consequently find in themselves the determination to not compromise their own visions for the sake of retaining unhelpful staff.

The small minority of parents seeking a very different type of leader for their beloved school were harder nuts to crack. Villages can be… 'interesting' communities, with the more 'traditional' families happy to make their feelings towards me abundantly clear from pretty early on. The only way to overcome this was to focus on my strengths – which were my relationships with the children and my ability to build a strong and supportive staff team. And in the end, we won them over.

> "The internal doubts that accompany imposter syndrome can actually be a quiet leader's superpower"

Internal doubts

At some of the most challenging times, there were moments when I wondered whether I should try to assume the role of a more 'traditional headteacher', but the internal doubts that accompany imposter syndrome can actually be a quiet leader's superpower. Introverts like me never feel completely at home or on top of things, and are thus prepared for (nearly) anything to happen.

So it was that I came to see my primary role as being a 'quiet leader' – to communicate a feeling of

preparedness to my staff. I absorbed as much of the pressure as I could, in order that they would have the space they needed to teach to the best of their abilities.

This also involved reducing the workload of my staff as much as humanly possible, by filtering out all the useless 'noise' of paperwork that many schools continue to insist on. I asked them to only focus on doing what mattered, and to do that well. As a result of these actions, I was able to build up a level of trust in my staff that other school leaders viewed from afar with envy. We were a team, and we were in it together.

Creating the right conditions

In my time as a headteacher, I could see that the mood within the profession was changing. Rising pressure for results, dwindling resources and an increasingly reactive culture have seen many schools abandon long-term strategies for 'quick fixes'. These highly visible reactions are often built on sand, however, creating huge additional burdens for staff and proving ultimately unsustainable over time. We tried as much as we could to *not* be reactive, but to rather play the long game and stick to what we believed in.

My job was to create the conditions that would enable that to happen.

My own leadership journey later served as the inspiration for my book, *Quiet Leadership: The Power of Introversion in Schools*. Although my approach was driven by my highly introverted personality, I came to see how the principles of 'Quiet Leadership' could actually be adopted by anyone, and help support others in bringing about transformational change within their own settings.

Leading in this way admittedly requires bravery, and a thick skin at times, but it's the antidote to the toxicity we've all seen steadily creeping into the profession that we love. Now, in the second half of my career, my mission has become more than simply sharing my guiding principles. As previously mentioned, I've long struggled with imposter syndrome throughout my career, often worrying that other leaders I encountered were 'better' than me because of my inwardly focused personality.

I therefore want to show other 'quiet leaders' that their personalities can, in fact, make them *better* leaders, rather than weaker ones, I also want to educate those who may not understand what's going on behind the calm, restrained exterior of an introvert, and show them what we're capable of.

From the interview stage to daily CPD – and recognising how this impacts introverted children – the book outlines a series of simple adaptations leaders can use to build self-sustaining school cultures and achieve the aim of every quiet leader – continued growth and strength, even long after you yourself have moved on to pastures new.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Andrew Marsh retired from teaching in 2024 at the age of 50, having been a class teacher and school leader, including serving as acting headteacher at crisis schools for his LEA; *Quiet Leadership: The Power of Introversion in Schools* is available now (£18.99, Crown House Publishing)

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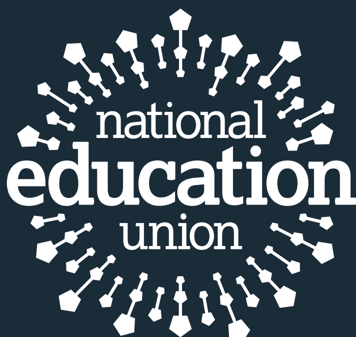


THEY GO QUIET – *then they go missing...*

The pupils we're at risk of losing to disengagement often won't give us any formal reasons to worry until it's too late, writes **Gloria Dalafu**

Over 20 years of secondary teaching, I've now sat in the same meeting, during the same week of February, far too many times. A child has dropped off the radar. The pastoral lead has their file open. Someone gently says that '*We could see this coming...*' The rest of the room knows it's true.

The previous October, the child would have still been in the building – maybe even on a roll, attending lessons, handing her homework in on time. Yet by the following February, she's barely attending at all. Come July, she'll be out. By what would have been her Y11, she'll be NEET.

We could see it. Form tutors saw it. Subject teachers saw it. Some of us acknowledged it in the corridors. None of it travelled.

Pre-absence drift

I've been a form tutor, head of year, safeguarding lead and lead practitioner in maths. Across inner London and Essex, at different schools with different intakes, it's always the same meeting where we'll be discussing the same timeline – the child's in the building, the first warning signs start to emerge, but the adults who spot them have no shared language for what they're seeing.

These are our 'invisible learners' – still on roll, still turning up each day and still compliant, but already slipping. There is, however, a brief window in which we can still reach them that I call the 'pre-absence drift'.

This refers to the weeks – sometimes months – between those first quiet signs of disengagement and the crisis that finally activates safeguarding systems. It's the cheapest moment in which we can help, but we almost never use it.

What does pre-absence drift look like from the inside? It's a pupil who used to contribute and now doesn't. Not refusing, just no longer reaching. It's the Monday absence for which no real reason is given, followed by normal attendance for a while until the next Monday absence. It's the friendship group that quietly reshapes itself so that our invisible learner ends up on the edge of it, without anybody asking why. It's the Y10 who's stopped talking about what they want to do after school.

Taken in isolation, none of these will trigger a referral. Taken together, in relation to the same pupil over the course of half a term, they amount to a child trying to tell us something.

What we're missing

This isn't a data problem. The relevant information will already be held by the school in the form of class registers, behaviour logs, pastoral notes and that one email sent by a teacher on a Thursday afternoon. Form tutors hold most of it in their heads.

It's actually a threshold problem. We've built a system that activates only when a child is persistently absent, formally disruptive, or failing in a measurable subject. Otherwise, the system itself is blind, while those working within it – the form tutors, the pastoral leads – have no shared language with which to address the issue.

Tiredness is also a factor. It's easier to respond to the child who's shouting than the child who's slowly fading. The latter won't push you into taking action, which is precisely why she needs you to.

The half term difference

I am not asking for a new programme to be implemented, but for a new type of language to be used.

This term, have your year team give it a name – 'pre-absence drift', 'quiet withdrawal', 'the over-mask', 'the friendship shift'. Once those terms start circulating, observations start getting shared. Because right now, the warning signs are sitting in form tutors' heads and going no further.

Trying giving October the same weight as the exam window, because the children we stand to lose are those we have the most time to help. February is when such responses start getting expensive, after the child realises that nobody has noticed them.

Treat your quieter students as seriously as the louder ones. If a student who used to regularly put her hand up hasn't done so for several weeks, that's a conversation – not a 'wait and see'.

The children that we're at risk of losing are those who have given us warnings in a language we can't yet hear – but we can learn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Gloria Dalafu is the founder and chief executive of School2U Virtual Academy CIC, having previously spent 20 years working at inner London and Essex secondary schools in a range of roles. School2U works with schools on early prevention of disengagement – to find out more, visit school2uvirtualacademy.com

Written by the WINNERS...?

Gordon Cairns highlights the ways in which international football can teach us valuable lessons about world history...

No matter how often the phrase 'sport and politics don't mix' is repeated, the reality is that they frequently do. Just look at the recent machinations surrounding Iran's participation in this summer's World Cup.

At the time of writing, some US politicians have suggested that the country America is currently in conflict with should be replaced by Italy – a country that the Trump administration would love to get back on side after the recent fallout with the Pope.

Indeed, every four years the World Cup perfectly illustrates how politics and football are less like oil and water, and more like the component parts of a gin and tonic...

Memories of '78

Coincidentally, Iran is also a key factor in why many Scots ascribe an historical importance to the year 1978 on par with that of 1066. This is because Scotland's failure to manage more than a 1-1 draw against the Iranians in that year's World Cup tournament held in Argentina led to the Scottish squad being knocked out during the first round.

Now, while that might not seem as politically significant as being conquered by a foreign power, it's widely believed that the fallout from this earlier than expected elimination doomed a 1979 devolution referendum on whether to establish a Scottish Assembly.

From the distance of almost half a century, it might seem incredible to think many in Scotland were extremely confident that their national team were actually going to lift the trophy, or at least receive a medal as claimed by manager Ally McLeod.

Such was the level of hubris, the team left for South America after a carnival event at the national stadium, waved off by 25,000 delirious fans. Contrast this with the country's distinctly lower expectations for 2026, when a national holiday was declared – resulting in the closure of almost every school – simply for qualifying for the competition. The first time Scotland has done so in 28 years.

Back in 1978, Scotland's failure to progress beyond the group stages embarrassed the nation for daring to dream. The self-belief that this little country could compete against far bigger sporting rivals as equals on the world stage was shattered.

In March the following year, the referendum's 63.72% turnout meant that the 51.62% vote in favour still fell short of a threshold requiring a 'Yes' vote from at least 40% of the total electorate.

> **"Competing in the World Cup can influence the fate of governments"**

National pride

If the idea of a nation rejecting more constitutional powers because of their team's performance in a football competition seems far-fetched, then consider the actions of the Argentinian Junta during the same tournament.

Needing to beat Peru by four clear goals to reach the final, the country's military dictatorship took some of Peru's political prisoners off their hands and placed them in an Argentinian jail, while simultaneously sending their South American neighbours a massive shipment of grain. Argentina went on to become World Champions, enabling the country's military dictatorship to further strengthen their grip on power due the massive surge in national pride that followed.

Even in democracies, competing in the World Cup can influence the fate of governments. While it's commonly thought that England's 1966 World Cup victory on home turf helped Harold Wilson's Labour Party into power, the election was actually held four months prior to the World Cup final.

The 1970 World Cup competition held in Mexico, however, *did* coincide with a general election, with both England and Wilson considered favourites for winners and PM. At the time, Labour held a 7.5 point lead in a major opinion poll, had seen success in the recent local government elections and were overseeing a strongly performing economy, all of which seemed augur well for them securing a further term. Being respectively the sport and political party of the working classes, it was widely assumed that victory in one arena would be replicated in the other.

Of course, the converse could also be true. England were knocked out during the quarter finals by West Germany. Four days later, Labour lost that year's general election to the Conservatives.

The day after England's ill-fated match, politicians canvassing in Birmingham detected a distinct shift in the electorate's mood. Minister of Sport, Denis Howell, went as far as placing responsibility for his party's election defeat firmly at the door of England's reserve goalkeeper, Peter Bonetti, for letting in a couple of the German goals. In his autobiography, Howell wrote, "*The moment goalkeeper Bonetti made his third and final hash of it on the Sunday, everything simultaneously began to go wrong for Labour for the following Thursday.*"

Paying lip service

Sport was even able to shape the politics of the day during the very first World Cup held

in 1930, when host nation Uruguay became the inaugural winners. This victory for such a small nation – which had been ripped apart by a long-running civil war that had only ended a few decades earlier – was seen as a triumph for its progressive education system, which had focused on the kind of physical training it was hoped would create world-class sportsmen. The fact that Uruguay had a population of less than 2 million, yet could still take on and beat the rest of the world, gave the country's still relatively new sense of national identity a huge boost.

That's not to say sport and politics *can't* be kept separate, however. At the 2022 World Cup held in Qatar – where homosexuality is illegal – the country's government paid lip service to governing body FIFA's requests for a slight loosening of its restrictions on LGBT people's freedoms for the benefit of visiting fans.

Two years beforehand, the repressive Qatari regime assured the world that LGBT visitors would, in fact, be welcome, and that fans would even be free to fly the rainbow flag at the games – steps that wilfully overlooked the plight of their own LGBT subjects, for whom a same sex relationship could lead to spending seven years behind bars.

Yet even this minimal acceptance of LGBT fans attending the games seemed to falter in practice. Countless stories soon emerged of fans being told to remove their Pride hats and place any rainbow flags in the nearest bin. A BBC cameraman who wore a Pride watch strap was initially barred from entering a stadium, and was only able to gain entry after a phone call to the relevant authorities.

As for any hope that the opening up of this often inward-looking country to visitors from all over the world might influence the regime and pave the way for more open-minded policies – well, four years on, the Qataris are still waiting...

Current frontrunners

This year's competition may potentially be staged during another important election in the UK, this time over who will lead the Labour party and therefore become (or indeed remain) Prime Minister. The two frontrunners as I write these words, Keir Starmer and Andy Burnham, are both famous supporters of their respective football clubs, Arsenal and Everton.

Imagine if Arsenal's Bukayo Saka scores the penalty that nets England the World Cup for the first time in 60 years, or if a mistake by Everton goalkeeper Jordan Pickford knocks England out in the first round. Could either event cause the Labour membership to vote one way or the other, with far-reaching consequences for the country's future?

Looking back over the history of the World Cup, it seems you can never be too sure...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

FULLY CHARGED

Daniel Harvey considers how the development and growing adoption of electric vehicles can serve as a useful case study for applied science...

Electric vehicles, or EVs, aren't new, but they're now increasingly shaping the future of personal motoring. Sir Clive Sinclair foresaw this way back in 1984, but couldn't sell his own contribution to EV history – the iconic, yet poorly selling and ungainly Sinclair C5.

From the vantage point of 2026, it's become abundantly clear that the car industry landscape is being built around EVs. We've even seen Ferrari launch its very first electric car in the form of the Luce – a 1000bhp sports car.

Against a backdrop of spiking petrol prices driven by the latest crisis to hit the Middle East, and the net zero carbon economy policies now being pursued by governments around the world, many families and car users will be contemplating the purchase of their first EV (if they don't have one already) and doing their bit for the cause of cleaner motoring.

Fertile ground

It's been interesting to observe the changes in wider public attitudes towards the EV revolution. In 2023, Rowan Atkinson penned a highly critical and widely publicised opinion article on EVs for *The Guardian*, in which he confessed to feeling 'duped' by the environmental claims made for EV technology, and took issue with the then government's proposed ban on sales of new diesel/petrol cars from 2030 (see tinyurl.com/ts155-EV2).

The piece was subsequently met with several public rebuttals, and was even cited in a House of Lords report as a factor in the decline of EV sales across 2024 (tinyurl.com/ts155-EV4).

All this would seem to be fertile ground in which to develop teaching opportunities in science lessons and wider STEM subjects that utilise EVs as a focal point for teaching a wide range of related concepts.

I've included here a series of links to other recent articles and ongoing debates, so that science and STEM teachers can incorporate contemporary sources and material into their lessons, alongside the underlying facts and knowledge regarding the science involved with the growing demand for, and increasing use of EVs. After all, given the government's timeline,c in the near future nearly all of our current school students will never even get to experience driving a new petrol car feels like.

Project-based learning

However, you might be of the view that EVs can be used to teach entirely different topics. I'm admittedly approaching this as a chemistry specialist, rather than a physics or D&T teacher, but an online search will quickly surface many EV-adjacent resources from reputable providers, including the Association for Science Education (ASE) and the Institute of Physics.

> **"There's an almost limitless range of potential learning enquiries and opportunities for students to explore"**

In any case, you won't be alone. Science and STEM teachers the world over are looking at the learning opportunities afforded by the adoption of EVs, with the result that I was able to find many useful resources that could be adapted into my school's planned and taught science curriculum with few changes needed.

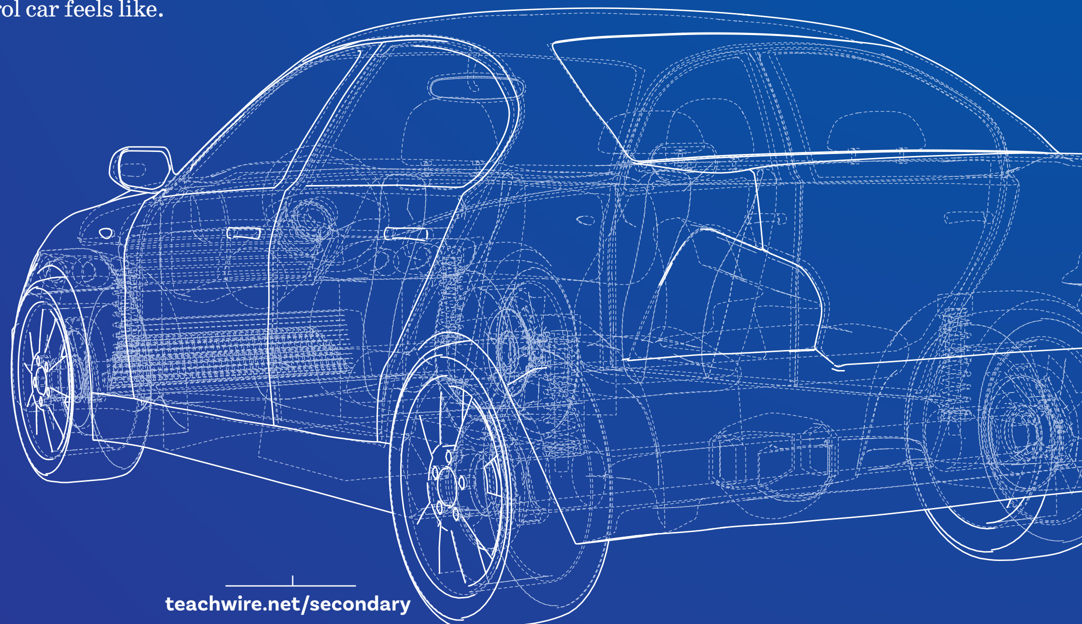
For some teachers and schools, there may be a desire to demonstrate the interconnectedness of issues surrounding EVs to students via a singular, coherent multi-disciplinary approach. For instance, some readers may be familiar with the 'project-based learning' (PBL) methodology that can be applied to the planned and taught curriculum.

This is a very different way of thinking about curriculum design, planning and teaching which requires significant expertise if it's to work effectively. However, with a topic such as EVs, the potential afforded by PBL to let students pursue immersive learning experiences around this and other issues is near limitless.

Care and expertise

We could proceed with our project by posing a relatively simple question, such as '*Will the switch to EV cars from 2030 make a significant difference to the UK?*' Immediately, a whole multitude of related threads for potential exploration opens up, enabling students to try and produce a fully reasoned and wide-ranging response.

It's also worth paying attention to how some



education groups – including the US-based High Tech High (hightechhigh.org) and XP Trust here in the UK (xptrust.org) – have already embedded PBL into their curriculum approach with considerable success, skilfully binding together a range of different subject themes to create a narrative-based problem solving methodology. High Tech High has been particularly adept at allowing its students to create ambitious, D&T-inspired products.

PBL isn't necessarily for everyone, given the high level of care and expertise such projects demand, but it remains an approach that can be used to provide students with a critical understanding of the benefits and drawbacks to owning and running an EV, as well as the science and technologies that underpin how they work.

In Summary

When teachers possess relevant knowledge and understanding of the scientific concepts linked to EVs, and can combine this with a passion for showing how the curriculum is relevant to their students' present and future lives, there's an almost limitless range of potential learning enquiries and opportunities for students to explore.

That said, drawing on contemporary issues to highlight the urgent importance of certain concepts isn't new. Some readers may well remember 'SATIS' – a teaching approach developed by the ASE aimed at helping students learn how science supports various aspects of modern life.

These opportunities overlap with so many other science concepts, not to mention other subject disciplines, that teachers could opt for a more straightforward planned curriculum option, such as utilising EV-based examples to study, for example, energy recuperation rates after braking, as a way to better understand the physical effects of energy storage and how it can be made more efficient.

As previously mentioned, the ASE is among the organisations that have made a host of appropriate science resources available online, STEM Learning (stem.org.uk) being another. Some science teams might want to pursue the option of developing a whole unit of study around the theme of EV technology, or go a step further by developing a full project-based learning opportunity similar to those of High Tech High or XP Academy.

Ultimately, when teaching the linked concepts suggested below, in a manner that highlights their interdependence, science and D&T teachers have plenty of options. In so doing, we'll be showing our students how humankind has been able to utilise scientific knowledge and understanding to at least start overcoming the host of issues posed by global warming and our over-reliance on fossil fuels.

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

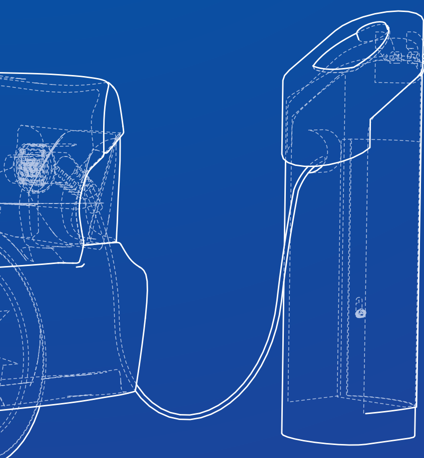
USEFUL RESOURCES

REDUCING EMISSIONS FROM TRANSPORT
Full lesson from Oak National Academy with accompanying slides and video
tinyurl.com/ts155-EV5

COMMON MYTHS AROUND ELECTRIC VEHICLES
Insightful blogpost hosted at the Autotrader Insight website
tinyurl.com/ts155-EV6

'DESIGN AN ELECTRIC VEHICLE' CHALLENGE
A real-world challenge available from the Energising Futures website that tasks students with designing a consumer-friendly electric vehicle
tinyurl.com/ts155-EV7

EV-related science idea	Links to
Combustion of hydrocarbon fuels	KS3 and 4 GCSE chemistry and combined science
Dangers and issues from combustion products (CO2, CO, particulates, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide)	KS3 and 4 GCSE chemistry and combined science
Science of global warming	KS3, GCSE chemistry and combined science, A Level chemistry
Environmental benefits of EVs over petrol and diesel cars	KS4 chemistry, combined science, A Level chemistry
Life cycle assessments	GCSE chemistry and combined science
What does 'carbon neutral' mean, and do EVs achieve net zero?	GCSE chemistry, combined science and A Level chemistry
What is renewable energy?	KS3 science, KS4 physics and combined science
How does a rechargeable car battery work (and why are they so large)?	KS4 physics and KS5 A Level chemistry
The mechanics of battery charging and how AC becomes DC	KS4/5 physics and combined science (electricity units)
Efficient battery levels (and why car batteries shouldn't be 100% charged)	KS4/5 physics (electricity and energy units)
Energy recuperation	KS4/5 physics energy units



A unique landscape

Hayley Bissenden explains how she and her colleagues have sought to better prepare trainee teachers for their local area's distinct challenges and support needs

The government's Schools White Paper, published earlier this year, rightly identified the need for trusts to be civic institutions rooted in their communities. But if that's to become a reality, trusts must take greater responsibility for developing the workforce their communities need. In rural and coastal areas especially, this can't be solely achieved through national, one-size-fits-all solutions.

The White Paper's renewed focus on expanding school-based ITT routes comes at a critical juncture. The National Foundation for Educational Research's 2026 Teacher Labour Market report (see tinyurl.com/ts155-ITT1) projects that secondary recruitment will reach only 86% of target nationally, and that recent improvements in teacher supply remain "*Partial and could easily be reversed.*"

Recruitment and retention challenges remain acute across the country, but they're intensified in rural and coastal areas.

Unprepared for the reality

For too long, teacher training has largely been designed through a national lens, on the assumption that the same approaches will work equally well in all parts of the country.

Yet training to teach in inner-city London is fundamentally different from training to teach in rural Cornwall. Geography, local infrastructure and the specific needs of communities all play a part in shaping that experience.

As a sector, if we're to be serious about strengthening the teacher workforce, particularly in harder-to-recruit regions, then teacher training must consistently reflect *place*. At Cornwall Education Learning Trust (CELT), this realisation prompted us to rethink how we approach our teacher recruitment and development.

The 'generic national route'

Like many trusts operating in rural areas, we were facing persistent workforce challenges. Recruitment pipelines were becoming increasingly fragile, and we were feeling the pressure of lower than desired rates of teacher retention.

And yet, arguably our most pressing issue was that many trainee teachers were arriving at CELT schools having followed a more generic national route. As a result, they were unprepared for the reality of what teaching in a coastal and geographically dispersed county actually involves.

Trainees would arrive with strong academic foundations, but many lacked an understanding of the realities of teaching within rural and coastal communities. Some were unfamiliar with the scale of travel required between schools, while others had little awareness of the hidden deprivation beneath Cornwall's popular image.

Schools were also finding that trainees moving between placements were having to continually adapt to different behaviour systems and school cultures. This limited their ability to build confidence and consistency in practice, and made long-term retention more challenging.

We recognised that if we wanted to build a sustainable workforce, then we would need to take on a more active role in trying to shape that pipeline ourselves.

Educators and civic leaders

In partnership with Plymouth Marjon University, CELT developed a trust-led ITT programme delivered through our Centre of Excellence. At its heart is a bespoke unit called Place and Social Purpose, designed specifically to prepare trainee teachers for teaching in the South West.

The unit explores how place influences education, aspiration and opportunity. Trainees examine issues impacting local communities and we encourage them to think critically about their role, both as educators and as local civic leaders.

These conversations matter, because Cornwall presents a unique educational landscape. Infrastructure challenges mean travelling across the county can be difficult and time-consuming. Public transport is limited, meaning that for many trainees, a car is essential.

Despite Cornwall being often associated with tourism and affluence, many communities experience significant hidden poverty and lower social mobility, as highlighted in Plymouth Marjon University's 2025 'Pretty Poverty' report (see tinyurl.com/ts155-ITT2). These realities are what shape pupils' experiences and aspirations, and thus what effective teaching and leadership should look like.

Place-based training

Too often, these contextual realities are absent from national conversations around teacher training. Recruitment challenges in rural and coastal areas are frequently discussed in broad statistical terms, yet few consider the ways in which geography can shape a trainee's daily experiences.

For many trainees in Cornwall, placement logistics alone can present barriers to entering or remaining in the profession. This is why place-based training matters. It recognises that educational improvement doesn't happen in abstraction, but rather within different communities, each with their own distinct needs and pressures.

A trainee entering the profession in Cornwall must understand not only curriculum and pedagogy, but also the lived experiences of the young people and families who they'll be supporting.

The CELT difference

Our approach is therefore intentionally different. CELT recruits trainees directly, and carefully aligns placements to geography, school culture and individual needs. We insist on meeting trainees in person, because we're not simply recruiting for a course – we're recruiting future colleagues.

During interviews, prospective trainees will complete short 'micro-teach' activities that allow us to understand how they will interact with pupils and communicate ideas. The focus is on their *potential* and *values*, to ensure that they're the right fit for the right school.

We also carefully consider which schools will be most appropriate for a trainee's development – e.g. whether they'll thrive in a larger or smaller setting, or benefit from the environments some schools can provide for second, rather than initial placements.

> **"ITT should prepare people to not just enter classrooms, but to also understand the communities they serve"**

Just as importantly, trainees are embedded within a consistent teaching and learning framework across the trust. Behaviour expectations, approaches to pedagogy and professional standards are always consistently aligned across all CELT schools.

This lets trainees focus on developing as practitioners, rather than having to continually re-learn systems. Moving between placements thus becomes a process of building confidence and broadening experience, not starting again from scratch each time.

Contextual relevance

This consistency helps to produce some significant long-term benefits. By the time trainees have moved into their ECT years, they'll have already become familiarised with the trust's culture and educational philosophy. They'll have built relationships across different schools, developed a better understanding of the communities they serve, and hopefully come to feel that they're part of something bigger than a single teaching placement.

This in turn strengthens retention, since trainees aren't simply joining a school for a year – *they're becoming part of a community*. That sense of belonging matters enormously in rural areas, where professional isolation can sometimes become a challenge in itself.

Our trainees form part of a smaller cohort working across CELT schools, enabling strong communities of practice to develop. Alongside their university studies, they will get to benefit from weekly check-ins, as well as trust-wide collaboration efforts and bespoke professional development delivered through the CELT lens.

Importantly, this model doesn't come at the expense of academic rigour. Our partnership with Plymouth Marjon University ensures that trainees will continue to receive high quality subject expertise and research-informed input from the university's professors and specialists.

The relationship between schools and universities can often feel disconnected, but to us it's crucial. The strength of our programme comes from combining academic depth with contextual relevance.

Universities bring expertise, scholarship and theoretical understanding, while trusts bring practical insight into local schools, communities and workforce needs. Closer collaboration allows both sides to contribute what they do best.

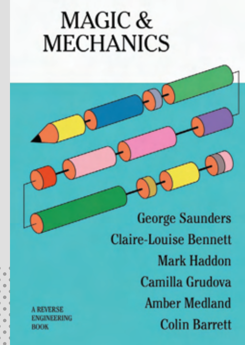
Place-based teacher training won't solve every recruitment challenge facing the profession, but it does offer a more sustainable and responsive model for regions where geography and local context fundamentally shape educational experiences.

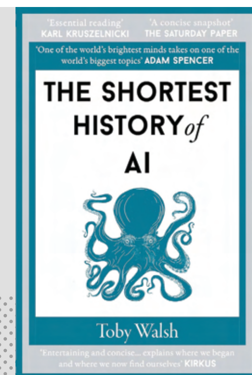
Perhaps most importantly of all, it encourages us to rethink the purpose of teacher training itself. ITT should prepare people to not just enter classrooms, but to also understand the communities they serve, the barriers faced by their pupils, and the role they can play in improving life chances within those places.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Hayley Bissenden is director of the Centre for Excellence at Cornwall Education Learning Trust; for more information, visit celtrust.org

Off the Shelves

Brilliant titles for you and your students to explore





The Wisdom of Charlotte Brontë

(Grace Milne Rae (Ed.), Bodleian Library Publishing, £9.99)

This collection of quotations from the works of Charlotte Brontë isn't dissimilar to the book *Dickens, The Funny Bits*, which I previously wrote about back in issue 14.1. As well as providing an accessible introduction to one of the 19th century's great writers, it also serves up some excellent material for classroom discussion, even in areas outside of literature. Take, for example, the poet Southey's response to a letter from Brontë stating her desire to be a poet – lecturing her on how she should '*Concentrate on her duties as a woman*' – making for a stark illustration of attitudes towards women at the time, and how pioneering Brontë was. The quotations included here span her whole life, taking in her thoughts on prejudice, poetry, men, women and even teachers and pupils, and are presented in a way that makes dipping in and out of this book's pages a genuine pleasure.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman
bit.ly/Eclecticism

Magic & Mechanics: A Reverse Engineering Book

(Tom Conaghan (Ed.), Scratch, £10.99)

This unique anthology presents us with six short stories by George Saunders, Claire-Louise Bennett, Mark Haddon, Camilla Grudova, Amber Redland and Colin Barrett. That line-up alone would secure it a spot on the bookshelves in most English departments, but *Magic & Mechanics* then goes further by pairing each story with an author interview, in which the aforementioned practitioners of the short story craft discuss how the story in question came to be, the inspirations they drew on and how the story was eventually received by readers and critics. These interviews contain a wealth of hugely valuable insights for English students exploring the processes of creative writing – though be advised that the stories themselves were never written with a teenage readership in mind, and hence include some, shall we say, *robust* language in places...

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

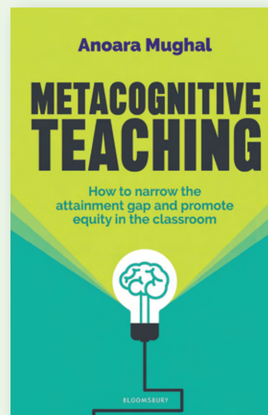
The Shortest History of AI

(Toby Walsh, Old Street £9.99)

How is it that ChatGPT, Claude and other AI models appear to perform so well at certain complex tasks that some people become convinced that they're sentient – only for them to then promptly fail at simple tasks that even a child could handle? And what's with their tendency to fabricate 'facts' if they don't 'know' the answer to a query? This very readable account of AI's recent history covers these questions and more, taking us on a journey from the first stirrings of AI technology over 70 years ago to the powerful models of the present day, filling in readers with information about the major players involved along the way, including Turing, Boole and others. For teachers of computing, it's a valuable guide to how AI-derived approaches to problem solving have evolved over time.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

ON THE RADAR



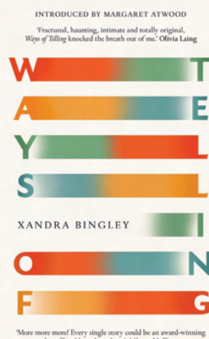
Metacognitive Teaching – How to Narrow the Attainment Gap and Promote Equity in the Classroom

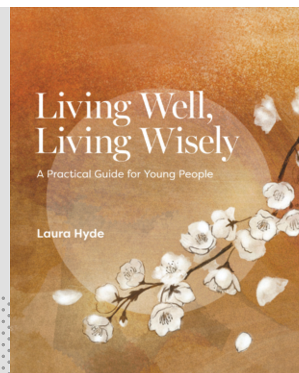
(Anoara Mughal, Bloomsbury, £18.99)

It's become common for teachers to see some students racing ahead while others struggle with the fundamentals. Thanks to extensive educational research in recent years, we now know how these attainment gaps can be sustained by a complex mix of SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, mental health difficulties and cultural difference – so what's a time-pressed, under pressure classroom teacher to do?

In Mughal's telling, the key to empowering struggling learners lies in metacognitive teaching – helping students recognise and understand 'thinking about thinking', so that they too can develop the subconscious observations, progress checks and course corrections regarding their own learning often practised by their further ahead peers. It's what distinguishes the student who clings to an ineffective approach before eventually giving up, from the student who can take a step back, tell when something's not working and attempt an alternative approach instead.

Metacognitive Teaching sees Mughal build a thorough case for the merits of metacognition, citing plenty of research as she goes, which can make for a dense read in places. That said, evident care has been taken in guiding readers through the specifics of what building metacognitive skills in a demanding classroom environment entails in practice, with reference to case studies and consideration of how metacognitive approaches may vary according to different subjects and its role in building effective revision skills. Comprehensive and convincingly argued, it's a book that's easy to recommend.





Ways of Telling

(Xandra Bingley, Notting Hill, £11.99)

Imagine an exceedingly rich cake that's likely to raise either your blood pressure (due to it costing three times as much as an ordinary cake) or your blood sugar (because of the ingredients). Add several lashings of double cream or custard and you have the culinary equivalent of this short story collection. There's no doubt that the writing is beautiful, albeit with words tumbling over each other, often unimpeded by punctuation. It has the effect of making you feel happy, or reflective, but without quite knowing why, at least until you revisit the text with a fine-tooth comb. The prose is effective because it's *very cleverly crafted*, with careful deployment of onomatopoeia, oxymorons and other devices, but without getting bogged down in too many adverbs or adjectives. It comes across as an English teacher's idea of the perfect text, and therefore seems worth keeping to hand in school...

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

Living Well, Living Wisely

(Laura Hyde, Troubador Publishing, £14.99)

As a former primary teacher, secondary headteacher, director of education and schools inspector, Laura Hyde has facilitated young people's education from all angles. Her contention, however, is that there's a crucial component currently missing from that provision – the imparting of a deeper wisdom that could help young people lead richer and more fulfilling lives. In *Living Well...*, Hyde has sought to produce a teaching tool built around an extensive selection of quotes and texts drawing on scripture, philosophy, poetry and contemporary commentary. Via a series of reflective questions and prompts for practical thought exercises, Hyde seeks to encourage meaningful engagement and discussion on issues ranging from preparations for adulthood, to the 10 'great virtues of humanity', relationships and the realities of later life. The book's careful sequencing ensures that the potentially sprawling scope stays contained, resulting in a thoughtful guide to the teaching of those life lessons that matter most.

Meet the author

LAURA HYDE

What motivated your decision to publish the book now, specifically?

I've come to the end of around five decades working in education, during which society has gone through some huge changes. What's become evident to me over time is that despite those profound societal changes, the needs of human beings have actually remained much the same.

Young people have become increasingly challenged by many factors now surrounding them, and it seems to me that education presently is failing to nourish their understanding. It gives them knowledge, but it isn't nourishing them with anything that can deepen their understanding and give them strength, vision, hope and clarity as to how to live well, and live responsibly.

Is the finished book consistent with your original aims and vision?

I wanted to open the perspectives of young people to the whole – much as I dislike the term – 'journey of life', from birth to death, and I'd say the end result fulfils that. In each decade of our lives, our focus tends to be rather limited to the perspective shaped by how old we are. I think it's useful to encourage the opening up of young people's perspectives to that of a whole lifetime, although the majority of the book is focused on adolescence, the process of becoming an adult and what adulthood really means.

How much of the material within the book came from practice you'd developed over your career, and how much was assembled with the book in mind?

It's difficult to quantify, but a bit of both. I've tried to keep the sources varied, so that they span a whole range of different traditions, including secular sources. The quotations and excerpts I've included are just a limited selection, with teachers obviously free to find their own resources and build on those, accommodating them within the different sections of the book. The quotations included are only an offering – teachers could easily draw on more.

In one section of the book, you explore 10 'Great Virtues of Humanity' – 'Truthfulness', 'Courage', 'Magnanimity', 'Compassion', 'Forgiveness' 'Harmlessness', 'Patience', 'Fortitude', 'Wisdom' and 'Gratitude'. How did you decide on those?

The final selection came from my experience of working with young people and from my own life experience. It seemed to me that those particular virtues could address all the essential elements. Each one is so deep and expansive that I think they cover most of what you could call the great universal virtues.

Laura Hyde is a former primary teacher, secondary headteacher, schools inspector, governor and director of education, as well as a qualified life-coach

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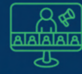
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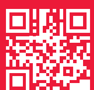

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[MATHS PROBLEM]

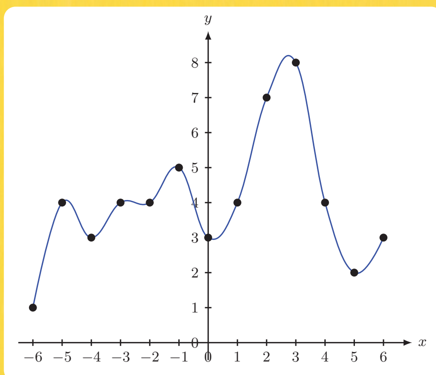
TRANSFORMING GRAPHS

When transforming graphs, the graph often moves in the opposite direction to what students expect, says **Colin Foster**

In this lesson, students understand why the graph of $y = f(x)$ moves to the left when it is transformed into $y = f(x + a)$, where a is a positive constant

THE DIFFICULTY

Look at this graph of a function $y = f(x)$.



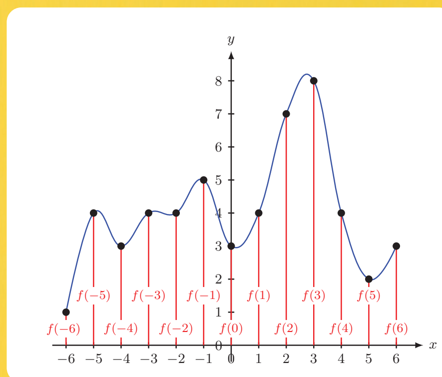
What would the graph of $y = f(x + 1)$ look like? Why?

Students are often confused by this, and think the graph would translate 1 unit to the right. Actually, it will translate 1 unit to the left.

THE SOLUTION

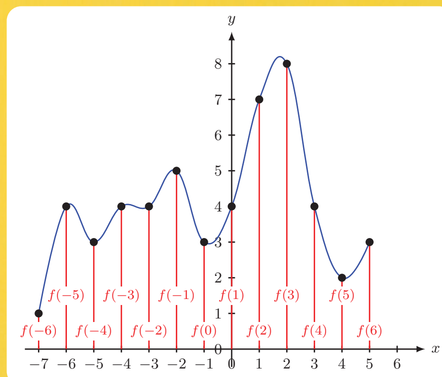
Look at the red vertical lines in this graph.

What do they represent?



The red lines are the y values, which are the $f(x)$ values, for particular (integer) values of x. For example, $f(3)$ is the y value when 3 is substituted into the function f.

Let's imagine translating the graph, and all its y values, 1 unit to the left, as shown below.



Now, $f(3)$ no longer appears at $x = 3$; it appears at $x = 2$. So, this graph must now be $y = f(x + 1)$.

Each x value steals the $f(x)$ value from the x value that is 1 higher, so the y value becomes $f(x + 1)$ instead of $f(x)$. Translating to the left means stealing y values associated with higher x values.

Checking for understanding

Make a similar argument for what will happen if we transform $y = f(x)$ into $y = f(2x)$.

Here, $f(6)$ will be dragged in towards the y axis until it reaches $x = 3$. All the red lines will move inwards until their separation is $\frac{1}{2}$, rather than 1. So, the transformation will be a stretch with scale factor $\frac{1}{2}$ parallel to the x axis.

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

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HELP YOUR *parents belong*

Charlotte Rowley explores the reasons why your parental outreach and communication efforts may be falling flat...

Across the education sector of late, there's been a real emphasis on the importance of belonging – and thank goodness! Feeling that you belong is a key ingredient and essential contributory factor towards attaining contentment.

In a world where mental health issues continue to rise – according to the youth mental health charity Young Minds, one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 had a probable mental health condition in 2023 – and when it seems more challenging than ever to just be a teenager, it's vital that we strive for a feeling of togetherness across our schools.

Detrimental impact

A sense of community, team and overall belonging shouldn't just be something that teachers and leaders aim to build in classes alone, however – and it definitely shouldn't be reduced to a buzzword or catchphrase, It has to permeate through our schools at every level and down to every stakeholder. Parents must feel a sense of attachment towards their school too.

Recent research carried out by the Education Endowment Foundation highlighted how effective parental engagement could lead to at least four months' additional progress in attainment among learners, which is substantial. The cost of such strategies and initiatives is low, and it's a cost that pays dividends. So why might things be falling flat?

We live at a time when complaints directed at services have risen sharply. *The Guardian* recently reported that "*More than 90% of headteachers and other senior leaders said they had been on the receiving end of 'challenging behaviour' from parents.*" In addition to formal complaints, that included what leaders felt had been an 'unreasonable' number of subject access requests, as well as assorted verbal and physical threats.

The impact of all this can be, and indeed has been, detrimental for school staff and leaders, suggesting that there ought to be a closer analysis of the root causes behind such behaviours. Why has the volume of complaints spiralled so much? How have we arrived at a point where experienced leaders are citing the above issues as their reasons for leaving a profession that they love?

Monthly spikes

We will often talk about mental health as it affects young people and cover it as a teaching topic in PSHE. Some schools will have even held themed days or weeks focused on mental health awareness raising. Speaking personally, I've noticed a significant rise in mental health issues and challenges among our families, not just our students – considerably more compared to when I began my teaching career 15 years ago.

Screen time and blue light addiction are often linked to the behaviours of our young people and teenagers, but they've given rise to issues that affect many adults too. Many of us spend an unhealthy amount of time on phones and watching screens. The growth in the proportion of people now working from home in the wake of the COVID pandemic has accelerated this trend yet further, while also blurring the lines between 'home being home' and 'work being work', meaning that for many families, it's become increasingly difficult to fully switch off.

Additionally, the cost of living crisis has impacted families in numerous ways. When families start running out of money mid-month, it can give rise to anxiety and other mental health issues. Examine the wider trends regarding behaviour and you'll quickly discover how schools see many more instances of difficult behaviour towards the end of the month.

This is why it's so important that you get to know your families, so that you can help to support them effectively, or at least signpost to what they need. Good pastoral teams do this well.

For many families, school will be a reassuring constant within their lives and sometimes a haven – but they might not realise this yet. When parents and carers are upset at the world, and (understandably) feel let down by systems outside of their control, they can turn to schools in order to offload.

This is in part because we won't turn

away from them. So what strategies can we deploy that will lead to more positivity, even when we perhaps don't have all the answers? What follows are some suggestions that will help. They may be small steps in some cases, but sometimes the simplest suggestions can be among the most impactful.

Mental health support

Our work with local mental health support teams has previously enabled us to host workshops for parents, in which they can enhance their broader knowledge of mental health and wellbeing (while ensuring their own is appropriately prioritised) and be signposted towards any external help and support they might need.

Confidentiality and privacy

Amid the cost-of-living crisis, it's come as little surprise to see how a number of families are now struggling with everyday demands, particularly those with several children and/or teenagers. With many finding it a challenge to make ends meet, schools are increasingly turning to hosting their own foodbanks on site. This can involve either working with local supermarkets to secure donations, or working with the FareShare scheme (fareshare.org.uk) where demand is especially high. Knowing your families, and understanding who among them will need the most support is crucial, and must be handled sensitively.

EAL Parents

For families who are new to the country, or who don't speak English as their first language, that sense of belonging may not develop as easily, thus making it even more important to reach out to them.

As the Bell Foundation (bell-foundation.org.uk) has noted, staff can sometimes assume that there's a lack of engagement from EAL parents and carers when in actual fact, there may be more barriers in play than we realise.

Effective strategies for supporting and engaging EAL families can include using translation tools for home learning, and inviting parents in with the intention of helping them form relationships with others. You could even gently encourage some to

CASE STUDY – IMPLEMENTING A PHONE BAN

In January 2026, St Martin's School in Brentwood began consulting with parents on a proposal to enact a complete ban on mobile phone use while students were at school.

These conversations took place prior to the government's announcement that all schools nationwide will soon be required to implement similar policies prohibiting the use of phones during the school day.

St Martin's School's phone ban finally took effect on June 1st, by which time some 92% of students had purchased a Phone Locker pouch.

Under the new rules, students are required to lock their phones away before entering the school grounds, and are physically unable to access them again until given access to special Phone Locker magnets as they depart at the end of the day.

Speaking ahead of the ban coming into force, the school's deputy headteacher, Georgina Tatman, said that the majority of students at the school were 'excited' at the possibility of seeing big changes in their mental health, ability to focus and friendships.

"*We started this process before the government guidance came out, so we were ahead of the curve.*" Tatman explained. "*We already had a policy in place to ban the use of mobile phones during the school day, but there was still that temptation for students to go to the toilet and check their messages and social media. That was obviously not something we could easily manage.*

"*We have concerns about students having regular access to social media and the impact that has on their mental health. Because of the growing research into the negative impact of social media and the addiction to mobile phones, we have had to take the next step. So, we are now going for a physical barrier to completely remove that temptation. It will be a fair and consistent approach for our students that will continue to build a really positive culture at St Martin's.*"

As part of its preparations ahead of enacting the ban, the school has organised reassurance sessions with students likely to experience anxiety in response to the change. Those with medical conditions requiring regular monitoring via an app, such as diabetes or a heart condition, will be able to unlock their phones when needed. The school also sought to reassure parents that if necessary, they could still contact students by placing calls to the school's landline.

"*We are really proud of how our school community has embraced this,*" Tatman continued. "*Our parents are all on board and really appreciative of us for taking this step. Just 8% are yet to purchase a Phone Locker, so they'll simply have to leave their phones at home. The majority of our students are really quite excited about the change.*

"*We have seen how the introduction of these pouches has worked at other schools, who report improved behaviour and social skills, with students interacting with each other more. To have a break and not be able to check their phone for six hours will be quite a refreshing experience for our students. We know it will have a positive impact and will take pressure off of our young people. This is going to be so powerful.*"

"For many families, school will be a reassuring constant within their lives and sometimes a haven – but they might not realise this yet"

eventually assume the role of parent ambassadors.

Marketing and communication

How we 'sell' things to parents is hugely important. Heavy use of jargon and confusing education acronyms will simply make parents (and possibly our own staff) want to switch off. For parents keen to find out more about their child's education, a corporate slide show filled with waffle will only lead to disengagement. Let parents and carers actually see your school for themselves by investing time in open evenings and exhibitions, and through showcasing what's happening day-to-day.

Bringing people together

Transitions to secondary school can sometimes be more challenging and anxiety-inducing for parents/carers than the students themselves. Moving from a small primary school setting where everyone knows each other to a large secondary, where one year group could be larger than an entire primary school, can make the chances of parents bonding actually even slimmer.

One simple way of creating a greater sense of belonging is by putting an effective PTA, 'helpers' group or online forum in place, formed of individuals who might be willing to help organise events. When the 'why' is explained, and people realise that the funds they donate will be going to directly benefitting their children via better trips, classroom equipment and so forth, the 'buy in' will be all the greater. Striving for academic success remains vital, of course – but it's the building of a sense of community that should be at the heart of how a school operates.

Over the years I've had many parents and families open up to me about the difficulties they're facing or the worries they have. Sometimes people just need to talk. Genuine displays of care and compassion will go a long way.

Parental engagement is a process that involves much more than simply monitoring the numbers of attendees at parents' evenings, important though that is. Real success in this area depends on being able to foster a parental engagement that's sustained and compassionate. Only then will you be able to build a culture of people working with, rather than against each other.

Charlotte Rowley is currently a headteacher at a one-form entry primary school in Staffordshire, having previously trained as an English teacher and worked in secondary schools as both a teacher and senior leader for over 10 years.

PARENTAL AGGRESSION – HOW BAD IS IT?

In March this year, the Association of School and College Leaders called for a national campaign aimed at encouraging parents to support their schools and colleges.

The move came in the wake of a survey carried out among the union's members, which found that over the previous 12 months, 95% of respondents had received 'unreasonable demands' from parents in terms of what their school could provide. 90% had experienced rude or disrespectful behaviour from parents, while 60% had received verbal abuse or threats.

73% indicated that they'd experienced subject access requests being deployed excessively, or in an aggressive way. 57% recalled having received hostile or defamatory comments on social media.

During her speech to this year's ASCL spring conference, the organisation's president, Jo Rowley, told of how "*A minority of parents with unreasonable expectations and short tempers are a drain on time, energy, and resources,*" before urging government to, "*Work with us on a national campaign to talk to parents about the importance of supporting their schools and colleges; the importance of their children following the rules for the benefit of all students; and if they're unhappy about something, the importance of making complaints in a polite and reasonable manner.*

"Most parents know this already and work very productively with their schools and colleges, but some parents are clearly struggling to deal with the pressures in their own lives, and their behaviour is very challenging.

"The huge amount of work and stress they generate detracts from other children, undermines behaviour policies, and contributes to the pressures which drive people out of teaching."

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What's your ethos?

Paul Hazzard recalls how a visit to his primary alma mater led him to reflect on the nature and importance of a school's ethos

By a strange quirk of fate, my wife is now a governor at the same primary school I left 50 years ago. I was recently invited to the school's leavers' assembly, and what struck me – beyond the tide of memory – was the atmosphere. There was a tangible sense of warmth, confidence and belonging that felt utterly familiar.

The school still occupies a small, three-classroom building tucked into a hillside. The headteacher greeted us all with firm handshakes, a generous smile and a few kind words that made everyone feel welcome. Two children sang a Taylor Swift cover, and I was instantly transported back to 1974, to that very same corner of the hall, where I myself once performed Cat Stevens' version of 'Morning Has Broken'.

What struck me then was the thought that *this is what ethos looks like*. You can see it, hear it and feel it radiating out from staff, pupils, parents and even guests. Yes, the upright piano may have been replaced by a Bluetooth speaker these days, and there are certainly a great many more screens and computers around – but otherwise, it seemed to me that the school's *core character* had barely changed in half a century. So what is it that can make a school ethos so enduring?

Defining 'ethos'

Wherever people gather, be it in classrooms or council chambers, an ethos will inevitably emerge.

Even street gangs, for all their volatility and the harms they're capable of, will observe a certain set of values, social codes and cultural rituals. I'm not suggesting that SLTs start taking management cues from gang leaders – but it's still worth noting how even in extreme environments and social hierarchies operating outside the law, it's *ethos* that shapes the behaviour, loyalty, compliance, work ethic and identity shared by a group's members.

Gangs don't write policies, or discuss their ethos at meetings, but their members know what the group stands for and act accordingly. The same goes for schools. Whether it's talked about or not, ethos is always there. It can be cultivated or allowed to grow wild, but it's always present.

Schools are vibrant communities, each with their own values, behaviours, habits and rhythms. That's why leadership teams should go about deliberately defining, nurturing and sustaining the ethos they want. A school that reflects on its ethos and embeds it into daily life will feel and function very differently from one that leaves this to chance.

The most effective ethoses aren't taught, but caught. They live in the sensory life of a school; the buzz in the corridors, the quality of interactions, in how pupils and staff treat each other.

We don't always need to define what the ethos is on paper, but we can describe what it looks like in action – and most importantly, feel it and respond to it accordingly.

A feeling and a force

When visiting a school, you'll start to feel its ethos almost immediately. It's there in the tone of the welcome you receive, in the pace of the corridors, in how its classrooms sound and feel.

Ethos, moreover, shows us how *safe* the school is; how hard its people work and how much joy there is to be found within its walls.

Ethos isn't just a feeling, but a *force;* one that shapes how we all behave, how we grow and what we believe is possible. That small primary school in the hills taught me something half a century ago, and reminded me of it again much more recently – that in the end, ethos might just be the song that remains the same.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Hazzard is an associate lecturer at St Mary's University College, Belfast, as well as a teacher and psychotherapist based in the Northern Ireland. He is also the founder of Education Matters – for more information, visit education-matters.org or follow @EducationMattersNow (YouTube)

Believing in NON-BELIEF

Should non-belief be addressed or acknowledged within RE lessons – and if so, how? **Andy Lewis** shares his thoughts...

There was a time, not so long ago, when to speak of atheism in a classroom was to risk stepping into highly contested ground. For much of educational history, atheism wasn't seen as a reasonable and acceptable worldview, but a provocation – a 'godless' label, a moral warning, or at best, a philosophical curiosity reserved for advanced study. It certainly wasn't something routinely afforded space alongside the 'big six' religious traditions usually found within religious education.

Yet the landscape has shifted since then, and decisively so. The British Social Attitudes Survey has consistently charted a rise in those identifying as having 'no religion', from around 31% in 1983 to roughly half the population since the late 2000s.

Cultural realignment

This isn't a marginal shift but a significant cultural realignment that's already present in our classrooms. Many of the students sitting before us each day won't locate themselves within an established or recognised religious tradition, even if they remain deeply interested in questions of meaning, purpose and ethics.

Education policy has gradually (and sometimes hesitantly) responded. Following the 2001 census, which made this demographic change impossible to ignore, RE syllabuses began to evolve.

Non-religious perspectives had been touched upon previously, but often only in ad-hoc or underdeveloped ways. By 2004, a more structured inclusion of atheism and other non-religious perspectives was being formally considered. Humanists UK developed an education offer for schools. Then a decade later, a significant legal moment arrived – the 2015 High Court ruling confirming that the exclusion of non-religious worldviews from GCSE religious studies specifications was unlawful.

By 2016, the place of non-religious worldviews in the examined KS4 curriculum was secured, though some would argue it's still minimal compared to the beliefs actually held by the wider population. This isn't merely a story of compliance or curriculum reform, however, but a deeper question of what we believe RE is for and what it should include.

From religion to worldviews

One significant development in recent years has been the conceptual shift we've seen from 'religious education' to 'religion and worldviews'. The 2018 Commission on Religious Education articulated this clearly when it stated that programmes of study should reflect "*The complex, diverse and plural nature of worldviews*", drawing from religious, philosophical, spiritual and non-religious traditions alike.

This language matters, since it reframes the subject as not just the study of 'religion' alone, but the exploration of how people understand and live out their interpretations of reality and lived experience. Within that framing, humanism, secularism, atheism and agnosticism are not bolt-ons or afterthoughts, but integral to the subject's landscape.

Importantly, the Commission also drew a line in terms of defining which 'ways of seeing the world' would qualify. Suitable worldviews were deemed to be those making ontological and epistemological claims as to what exists and how we know it, as well as moral and ethical claims. This is why Humanism or existentialism may sit within the subject, while political ideologies, such as nationalism or global capitalism, typically don't.

The challenge isn't *whether* to include non-religious worldviews, but *how* to do so with integrity in a balanced way.

Beyond absence

A persistent risk when teaching non-religious perspectives is reductionism. Too often, atheism is presented simply as the absence of belief: a lack, a negation, the 'opposite' of religion. This is pedagogically thin

and, of course, inaccurate, but can be prompted by a lack of real training and expertise in teaching such perspectives.

If we want to take our subject seriously, then we must afford non-religious worldviews the reasonable depth and texture we would seek when teaching students about Christianity, Islam or Hinduism. Just as a Hindu student may struggle to recognise their lived experience in overly schematic textbook depictions, so too might a student who identifies as non-religious fail to see themselves reflected in a simplistic account of '*People who don't believe in God*'

"At its best, RE isn't about producing agreement, but about cultivating discernment"

In reality, there's no single non-religious worldview. Some students may lean towards organised Humanism, with its emphasis on reason, ethics and human flourishing. Others may hold a more loosely defined secular outlook. Still others may describe themselves as 'nothing in particular' or a 'none', while still engaging deeply with moral questions, community values and existential reflection.

In RE, we're not simply filling a gap in the curriculum; we're attending to the lived realities of our students, who often come to our lessons with some of the biggest questions that humanity has struggled with from our earliest days.

Authenticity and encounter

One of the most fruitful principles in RE pedagogy is authenticity. Are we teaching a tradition as it's actually lived, or conveniently summarising it? That question applies just as sharply to non-religious worldviews.

An authentic approach might include engaging with contemporary Humanist writings, exploring how ethical frameworks are constructed without reference to the divine, or examining how non-religious individuals mark key life events – births, marriages, deaths – in meaningful ways. It might involve dialogue, where appropriate, with local communities or speakers to ensure that students encounter real voices.

This isn't about privileging one religion or worldview over another. If RE is to retain its academic credibility, it must present different worldviews – both religious and non-religious – on their own terms, while acknowledging their internal coherence and diversity. This is a challenge that's formed part of the work for a proposed National Curriculum for RE, following the 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review.

A broader horizon

The inclusion of non-religious worldviews also opens up a wider curricular horizon. The Commission on RE has gestured towards a broader range of traditions that may enrich students' understanding of the world – such as Confucianism or Wicca, for example.

Within this expanded frame, the binary between 'religious' and 'non-religious' becomes less rigid. Students start to see a spectrum of ways in which humans have sought to understand the world – some theistic, some non-theistic; some explicitly secular, while others resist easy classification.

This is where the subject can really come alive. Not as a checklist of beliefs, or a simple 'knowledge organiser', but as an encounter with the richness of human meaning-making which has fed into world history.

The classroom before you

When we teach non-religious worldviews well, we do several things at once. We're validating the identities of students who may otherwise feel marginalised within a traditionally religion-focused subject. We're also challenging religious students to engage more thoughtfully with alternative perspectives, sharpening their own understanding in the process.

At the same time, we're modelling a form of encounter and discourse that's both rigorous and respectful – something our wider society is in no small need of…

There's additionally a deeper educational purpose to consider. At its best, RE isn't about producing agreement, but about cultivating discernment. It invites students to weigh up claims, consider evidence, reflect on values and personally respond. Non-religious worldviews are no obstacle to these aims, but actually essential to the process.

A subject renewed

For teachers – particularly those working within faith-based settings – this can feel like a delicate balance. How do we remain faithful to a particular tradition, and indeed truth claim, while also doing justice to a plurality of religions and worldviews?

The answer lies not in dilution but in *clarity*. A confident subject doesn't fear complexity. It recognises that students are capable of engaging with difference without losing their own sense of identity.

The inclusion of non-religious worldviews isn't a concession, but a strengthening of the discipline. How can you fully understand Abraham's recognition of 'one God' without understanding something of early polytheistic beliefs? How can you fully understand the work of St Thomas Aquinas without David Hume?

If there's a single thread running through these developments, it's renewal. The move towards what some are terming a 'Religion and Worldviews' education; the inclusion of non-religious perspectives; the emphasis on authenticity and diversity – all point towards a subject that's evolving to meet the realities of contemporary Britain.

The real task now for those in the RE world isn't to simply add new content amid continuing struggles for time and capacity. It's to reimagine what it means to teach RE in a way that's intellectually robust, culturally aware and deeply attentive to the young people in our care.

In the end, this isn't just about atheism, or Humanism, or any single worldview. It's about the discipline itself; its purpose, integrity and future. And it feels like it might just help young people better navigate the world ahead of them – with understanding, compassion and the ability to respectfully disagree.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Andy Lewis is a teacher of RE and deputy headteacher at St Bonaventure's, East London; follow him at @andylewis_re (X) or visit mrlewisre.co.uk

What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

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Academy21 enables schools to deliver flexible support for pupils who need alternative approaches, helping students remain engaged with education and providing structured pathways with adaptable provision. With no minimum contract, schools can introduce support when needed and adapt as circumstances change. Schools interested in discussing how Academy21 could support their pupils can find out more at **academy21.co.uk**.

2 What do your pupils really know?

As AI increasingly blurs the line between independent work and assisted work, schools need better ways to understand genuine pupil understanding.

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Unique reporting allows schools to compare performance in lessons with independent work completed elsewhere, thus helping teachers build a clearer picture of what pupils genuinely know and can do on their own. The result is greater engagement, more effective interventions and a clearer picture of learning that combine to create stronger foundations for GCSE success. Explore more at **lbq.org/secondary-maths**.

3 Inspire their curiosity

Science amounts to more than experiments. It helps students understand the world around them, while encouraging their curiosity and powers of critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity – all skills that are highly valued by today's employers.

To keep students engaged and inspire their scientific curiosity, Rise offers a wide range of ready-to-use activities linked to the National Curriculum, making them easy to incorporate into lessons or set as homework. Bring some real-world relevance into your science lessons with our KS3/4 resources, which task students with stepping into roles such as 'sustainability manager' or 'climate change officer' for a local council.

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4 Digital Survivor Testimony in the Classroom

For teachers today, Holocaust education can feel overwhelming. With thousands of survivor testimonies available, the challenge is no longer access but how to use them meaningfully. Without guidance, even powerful testimony can be difficult to navigate and embed in lessons, and as live survivor visits become rarer, recorded testimony is now essential.

Supporting Holocaust Survivor Testimony in Teaching, delivered by the Holocaust Educational Trust on behalf of the Department of Education, builds teachers' confidence in structuring and contextualising testimony. Through dedicated CPD sessions, teachers gain classroom-ready resources, strengthening confidence and enabling effective use of recorded testimony in today's digital classroom. For more information, visit **tinyurl.com/ts155-WN1**.

5 Make your mark

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6 Inspection preparations

Have you had 'the call' – or are you currently dreading it? If so, don't panic! The National Education Union (NEU) has developed an Ofsted risk assessment, so that school staff can protect themselves from the damaging impacts of an Ofsted inspection.

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

7 Durable Wall & Door Protection

Secondary schools are busy environments, with corridors, classrooms and entrances experiencing constant daily traffic. Yeoman Shield wall and door protection systems are designed to withstand the demands of these high-impact areas, helping to prevent damage from bags, trolleys and general student activity.

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8 Setting the scene

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

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

9 Tavistock Education and Training

Tavistock Education and Training is a specialist provider of mental health, social care and leadership education. Its courses can give you a deeper understanding of the complex difficulties children and families experience, while building up your capacity for critical reflection and resilience.

Drawing on a rich history of over 100 years spent working with mental health and wellbeing professionals, its courses are developed and delivered by expert NHS clinician-tutors. Ranging from introductory short courses through to advanced postgraduate training, Tavistock Education and Training has a training pathway to cater for every step of your career. To find out more, visit **tavi-port.ac.uk**.

10 Thrive

An independent ImpactEd evaluation recently highlighted how relational, preventative approaches are helping secondary schools respond to rising levels of need, resulting in lower exclusion rates and more favourable attendance patterns compared to national trends.

Schools using the Thrive Approach saw improvements in emotional regulation and engagement, alongside consistent responses to behaviour. Notably, outcomes remained more stable for pupils with additional needs, with SEND wellbeing scores increasing by 5% over 2023/24, despite national declines. The findings indicate that earlier identification of need, along with more consistent responses to behaviour are the key drivers of improvements to exclusion and attendance rates. The report can be read in full at **thriveapproach.com/evaluationreport**.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

Sabrina Sulliman shares her experiences of using Little Wandle Code to address gaps in phonics knowledge among her school's Y7s

Sabrina Sulliman is a Literacy and SEND Intervention Lead at Southfields Academy, London

Prior to becoming involved in the Little Wandle Code pilot, what schemes or interventions were you using to engage struggling readers at Southfields Academy?

I'd previously supported Y7 phonics classes where we were using a different phonics programme, and had found student engagement to be really quite poor because they'd encountered the same programme before, at primary school. They recognised it straight away.

These students were in an intervention group who had been withdrawn from mainstream English class. I remember walking the kids to their phonics lessons, and having to persuade them to enter the room once we got there because they felt so 'babied'. The only progress we were making was with those students who were actually willing to engage with the material, but even then there were limits to what we could do by effectively teaching them the exact same phonics programme twice.

We eventually stopped delivering phonics interventions altogether, since the only options available to us were other primary programmes which we knew would make our learners feel that they were being patronised. Even so, that still left us having to support these unconfident readers. We could see that need was there and growing, particularly post-COVID, but there simply weren't any options to choose from.

How did you come to be involved in the Little Wandle Code pilot programme?

I was already familiar with the primary phonics programme, Little Wandle Letters and Sounds Revised. I was among a group of secondary teachers that had been invited to a demonstration of how it worked, and through that I got to hear how they'd started work on producing a secondary version called Little Wandle Code.

I immediately wanted to know more, because to me, the issue isn't with teaching phonics to secondary students *per se*, but with how you pitch phonics to children who have already experienced primary school phonics. If all you can offer them is a repeat of something they've done before, it's never going to work. Plus, there's that additional barrier of secondary school English teachers generally not having been trained up as teachers of literacy.

The notion of being able to train secondary school teachers and support staff in delivering phonics seemed like quite a unique offer. Having that as part of a programme written specifically for secondary school learners made me really want to see it in action, so we accepted the offer of signing up for the pilot programme.

How would you characterise the level of need for secondary phonics education, based on what you've seen at Southfields Academy? Has it stayed at a consistent level? Has it been rising?

As a non-selective school, we have a huge range in terms of ability. When I first arrived, our phonics provision was delivered as a small group intervention, with the majority of those children having identified additional needs through what we used to call a Statement, or because they were relatively new to the country.

Now, if I look over the cohort of children engaging with our phonics interventions, they don't all have EHCPs, a recognised or diagnosed need, and won't necessarily be new to the

country. I think that nationally, the need has been growing because children are sadly disengaging with reading and literacy more widely.

That said, I can't imagine that it's necessarily the same picture across all secondary schools. For context, we have nearly 80 children with EHCPs in our school and there are two resource bases here – one for deaf children, and one for children with a speech and language or ASD diagnosis. There is a breadth to our intake, but equally, while phonics was once viewed as a form of SEND provision for children with additional needs it is no longer being delivered in a corner of the school to a small number of children.

We actually have a fairly large Little Wandle Code intervention cohort, which is why it's become a higher priority for curriculum time. Our delivery now involves not just the English department, but also support from our pastoral team and some other teachers from across the curriculum, due to the impact that our phonics provision regularly has on students' overall progress.

Before, we were seeing relatively incremental progress – improvements of maybe around six months. Teachers won't necessarily see or feel that in their classrooms, but once children are making up to a year or more of progress in literacy, teachers will soon start telling you about students who are now writing much more in their assessments and other small, yet noticeable changes since the start of the year.

> **"They're starting to develop a relationship with books"**

What's been your overall impression of the impact the programme has had?

If I compare the first year to the second in terms of staff buy-in, the results spoke for themselves.

We had more people trained up to deliver the programme this year than we had last year. When I've surveyed those staff who are delivering Little Wandle Code, they speak highly of not just the progress the children have made, but more than anything the *confidence* they now have.

With these children, it can be sad to see just how unwilling they are to participate across the curriculum. They don't write things down because they think they'll get the answers wrong. They sometimes know a word, but not the spelling, so they won't answer. They worry when it looks like a teacher might call on them to read something out to the class. Often, they'll want to go completely unnoticed in the classroom.

A lot of the feedback we've received describes how some students have really come out of their shells, sometimes alongside improvements in their attendance.

Have you had any feedback from the students themselves?

Towards the end of the school year, I remember complimenting one of the girls in a Y7 phonics class for spelling out a word for another student, saying how brilliant it was and joking that she was helping me with my workload. And she said, really casually, "*Yeah, Miss – because I can.*" She wouldn't have said something like that at the start of the year, nor would she have helped her peer in the way that she did. That's what sticks with me, and it's the detail I share with other teachers when they join our phonics programme support team.

Statistically, some of the best progress we've seen has been among children with EHCPs who have, on average, made over a year's progress. I've also seen a rise in the number of books borrowed from the school library among this cohort, who would previously never have considered even visiting the library. You can really see the shift. They're starting to develop a relationship with books, in part thanks to the Little Wandle Code 'decodable anthologies' that collect together multiple short, accessible texts, but which outwardly just look like normal books.

I think they're amazing. They do a great job of hooking the kids, who barely notice how they're designed to be entirely decodable or the level of repetition. They're just *reading a book*, enjoying it and wanting to find out what happens next.

For more information about Little Wandle Code, visit littlewandlecode.org.uk

BEHIND THE CODE

Sarah Paxton, Programme Developer at Little Wandle, unpacks some of the design decisions that went into the decodable anthologies published by Collins.

"Our starting point was these mustn't look like standard phonics books, which are typically printed in a larger format and are very slim. We wanted them to look and feel like the books their peers are reading, with eye-catching covers. Since phonics texts are naturally short, bringing multiple stories together into anthologies was a practical and effective solution.

The challenge was to include variety and avoid the 'one sentence and a big picture' layout typical of many phonics books. Some stories in the anthologies use a graphic novel format, allowing for minimal text while still filling the page in an age-appropriate way. Poetry sits alongside non-fiction that uses photography in a style more familiar to older readers, and the illustration styles in the fiction stories have been chosen with the same readers in mind.

We've tried to be thoughtful about what students want and need, providing stories that are both engaging and accessible."

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AI killed the homework star...

I Teacher considers what teachers stand to lose in an AI age – with apologies to The Buggles...

'I read about you back in 2025 / A 'passing fad', since then gone into hyperdrive /
And now I wonder if our homework can survive...
Oh-wa, oh / Why does it matter? / Oh-wa, oh / If it got better...?
AI killed the homework star...'

Back in 1979, The Buggles famously sang that 'Video Killed the Radio Star'. New technology had arrived, forcing an old, established format to become suddenly instantly outdated almost overnight. And I'd contend that there's an eerily similar feeling in education right now...

The best prompts

My job is to listen and help as best I can.

But that's the problem. You're not helping *them* – the students. That's because schools are still clinging to traditional homework models while AI services quietly render many of that model's underlying assumptions obsolete. We've become radio stations insisting that TV is just a passing fad.

The uncomfortable truth is that AI has quietly entered the homework process already. Pupils are using it to draft essays, summarise chapters, generate revision materials and answer comprehension questions.

Some use it badly, of course, producing robotic nonsense that's easily spotted. Others, however, use it remarkably well, using refined prompts, editing outputs and blending AI-generated work with their own until it becomes almost impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins.

The most technologically advanced pupil in your classroom is no longer the child with the best laptop, but the child with the best prompts.

Instincts aren't evidence

You're absolutely right! Students shouldn't be using AI for those tasks. Shall I write a list of rules for how students should use AI?

No, you don't get it. You're acting like schools aren't trying to respond when we are. We're just fighting a losing battle.

AI detection tools, warning assemblies, increasingly desperate reminders that using AI counts as cheating. Teachers are encouraged to trust their instincts when marking suspicious work, but instincts aren't evidence. AI detection software is notoriously unreliable, and prone to producing false positives. Teachers are being asked to police a technological revolution armed with little more than gut feeling and a vague sense of suspicion.

It's an impossible position, because the real problem isn't just that pupils are cheating – it's that AI exposes serious existing weaknesses in the traditional homework model.

Homework, reimagined

You're absolutely right! Traditional homework depends upon a fairly fragile assumption – that pupils complete work independently, honestly and without substantial external assistance. But even before ChatGPT, that was never entirely true. Some pupils had parents helping with essays. Others had tutors. Some copied from revision websites. Some shared answers in group chats five minutes before the lesson.

Artificial intelligence hasn't created the problem – it's industrialised it.

And now schools face an uncomfortable question. What exactly are we assessing when pupils complete work at home?

The current response from many schools resembles that of past technological panics. Calculators were once condemned for 'destroying maths' and Wikipedia was treated as academic poison. Even the internet itself was viewed with suspicion at one time.

AI won't vanish because teachers write '*USE OF CHATGPT IS PROHIBITED*' at the top of homework sheets in bold capital letters...

Which perhaps means that the conversation schools really need to have isn't about banning AI, but rather reimagining the kind of work we're asking pupils to complete.

Homework as we've understood it up to now might be obsolete, but that doesn't mean independent learning is dead, or that pupils no longer need to write, think or practise extended responses.

Video killed the radio star, but radio survived by adapting, and we now face the same choice with homework. Because the question is no longer whether pupils are using artificial intelligence. The question is whether schools are prepared to admit how fundamentally it has already changed the rules of the game. If you like, I could now write this up as an article for* Teach Secondary*?

Sure, go for it...

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

ON THE UP

In every great school will be a positive workplace culture that inspires staff to stay in the profession and consistently improve – but what does that look like in practice?

In schools across England, addressing teacher shortages has become one of the most important opportunities for strengthening education. Secondary school class sizes have risen by 10% since 2016, and yet recruitment of teachers is running at just 62% of the numbers that are currently needed.

The issue is starkly illustrated by recent school workforce census data, which shows that the number of teachers in England's state schools has actually *fallen* for the second consecutive year, amounting to 1,900 fewer teachers than the previous year, and the lowest number of new and returning entrants to the profession for at least 15 years.

A leadership issue

At the same time that schools have been grappling with recruitment challenges, they've also been having to contend with worsening retention rates. Between 10% and 15% of teachers now leave the profession within their first year, with only 61% of all teachers still expecting to be teaching in three years' time – a figure that's down from 75% before the pandemic.

The challenge before us therefore involves not just attracting new teachers, but fostering school environments in which talented professionals choose to stay.

At the Education World Forum last month, I took part in a panel that discussed how investing in teachers worked to strengthen education systems. One clear conclusion to emerge from those discussions was that teacher retention is ultimately a leadership issue. Workload, wellbeing, professional growth, the quality of teaching and learning – all are shaped by the culture that school leaders create. Outstanding teachers thrive in outstanding schools because the *systems*, *behaviours* and *expectations* at those schools support them in succeeding. In weaker cultures, even great teachers will likely struggle.

The research confirms it – teachers who rate their school's leadership poorly in November will be far more likely to leave by the following summer. Schools led by less effective headteachers can expect to see both a higher turnover of staff and more frequent incidents of staff absence.

> **"Teaching must offer the kind of long-term professional development seen in other high-skilled sectors"**

What strong schools do

When people feel supported, valued and able to thrive within their workplace then they'll tend to stay, and schools are no exception. In settings where expectations are made clear, behaviour systems are consistent and the professional culture is coherent, teachers will be able focus on what they entered the profession to do – that is, actually *teach*.

Manageable workloads, strong leadership, clear opportunities for progression and professional recognition all matter, but they flow from that foundation. If schools are recognised as not just places of learning, but also as workplaces where skilled professionals can build genuinely rewarding, long-term careers, then there can be a real opportunity to improve both teacher retention and pupil outcomes.

Workload, of course, remains one of the most commonly cited reasons by teachers choosing to leave the profession. One survey found that nearly 8 in 10 teachers say their workload is 'unmanageable' or 'only just manageable'. Full-time teachers employed in the UK work 52.4 hours per week on average, substantially above the 48-hour Working Time Regulations limit.

This has consequences for everyone. According to the 2024 Education Support Teacher Wellbeing Index, 77% of UK teachers experience symptoms of poor mental health due to work, while 90% of those considering leaving cite high workload as a key factor.

Much of this pressure comes not from the teaching itself, but from the accompanying administration, data collection and accountability systems that leave many teachers feeling stretched. Strong schools will tackle this directly. Instead of expecting every teacher to build their own resources from scratch, they will invest in shared systems. Different departments will pool their resources. The curriculum planning will be centralised, and there may be the adoption of some novel approaches, such as live marking, whereby feedback is given to students in real time during lessons, rather than through hours of additional work outside the school day.

Behaviour and admin

Another significant driver of attrition that well-led schools actively address is behaviour. According to the DfE's 'Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders' report, 60% of teachers say they spend too much time following up behaviour incidents. Consistent, well-embedded behaviour systems will reduce that burden considerably – lowering stress, improving classroom conditions and giving teachers the headspace to do their best work.

Retention challenges don't end once teachers have mastered the classroom, however. ECTs will be particularly vulnerable to workplace pressures, often moving quickly from training into full classroom responsibility without sufficient mentoring or opportunities to develop their practice. Schools that prioritise structured induction, coaching and ongoing professional development will help their teachers thrive, but more importantly, stand a better chance of retaining them.

The challenge extends to leadership pipelines, too. In 2017, 55% of deputy and assistant headteachers aspired to become a headteacher, but by 2026, that figure had fallen to 37%. Many now see senior roles as increasingly dominated by matters relating to operational management, targets and compliance, rather than genuine educational leadership. Those schools that protect leadership roles from

administrative overload, while developing their middle and senior leaders with a real sense of purpose, will be better placed to retain ambition within the profession, instead of simply watching it walk out the door.

Investing in teachers

If schools want to retain talented staff, then teaching must offer the kind of long-term professional development seen in other high-skilled sectors. Better pay is, in itself, not enough; one meta-analysis of 120 international studies found that financial incentives alone, without structural career support, don't keep teachers in the profession. What matters more is sustained investment in mentoring, coaching and high-quality professional development.

This development needs to continue well beyond the early career stage and become embedded into everyday school life, rather than be treated as a series of isolated training events. Schools should create regular opportunities for coaching, collaboration and subject-specific professional learning, supported by evidence-informed approaches. The Education Endowment Foundation has previously identified sustained, job-embedded professional development as one of the highest impact interventions available to schools.

Equally important are progression pathways that allow excellent classroom practitioners to grow without being pushed into purely managerial roles. When career development is narrowly defined – deputy head, then head – many talented teachers can conclude that 'advancement' means having to leave the classroom. Schools that create alternative routes – such as 'lead practitioner' or 'research lead' roles that carry genuine status and salary progression – will be better placed to retain expertise that has direct, pupil-facing impact.

Scaling up the impact

At the Northern Education Trust, where I served as CEO, 67 out of 74 senior appointments were filled by internal candidates. That figure isn't incidental, but reflects what becomes possible when mentoring structures are deliberate, progression routes are visible and professional development is treated as a core organisational priority, rather than just a line in the annual budget.

Yet while individual schools and trusts can make improvements through their leadership and culture, retention is also shaped by national policy. A long-term workforce strategy is needed – one that treats retention as seriously as recruitment.

Policymakers have a role to play in reducing unnecessary accountability pressures and simplifying administrative demands, part of which will involve rethinking how school leadership itself is structured. Strong, multi-school group structures can empower exceptional school leaders to scale their impact across multiple schools, and create consistent cultures that bring about improvements in wellbeing, workload and behaviour management.

Moving beyond targets

Governments can further reinforce these priorities via inspection frameworks and performance measures, because schools will inevitably respond to what systems are designed to value. Whether through inspections, league tables or national assessments, policymakers can encourage those leadership practices and school cultures that are most likely to attract, develop and retain good teachers over the long term.

Great schools aren't built on targets alone. Their success depends on whether teachers can build sustainable and rewarding careers within them.

Improving retention is therefore not a 'secondary staffing issue', but one central to teaching quality and pupil outcomes. The systems that succeed in retaining teachers will be those that invest seriously in schools as workplaces where professionals can grow and thrive. When that happens, pupils benefit too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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The real GCSE TAKEAWAYS

Once GCSE results day has been and gone, what are the key issues and outcomes that school staff should reflect on and learn from?

Our immediate instinct on results day might be to focus on grade outcomes, but meaningful reflection should really start earlier, with a review of each school's exam culture.

For one thing, that final run-up to the exams is just as important as students' exam performance on the day. What kind of environment did you try to build and make available to students during their revision and mock exams? Did you offer dedicated revision sessions, and crucially, were they well attended?

If not, then were any strategies used to try improve attendance at these sessions? If so, then how effective were they? Among those students who did attend, did they find the sessions useful, or did they consider them more as an additional stress?

In some schools, external incentives play may a role in encouraging better outcomes. Prom, for example, is sometimes used as both a carrot and a stick. There may be rewards given for high attendance – such as transport upgrades, photo packages or free tickets – and conversely, more restricted access for those falling below certain thresholds.

Whether we agree with such methods or not, they do raise an important question – namely, how far should schools go in linking behaviour and attendance to end-of-year rewards?

Examining the data

Equally important is the conduct surrounding the exams themselves. How well were routines established – the lining up, the maintenance of silence, the directives to remain on site? Were there systems in place to support students with attendance challenges, such as staff intervention or even transport arrangements?

On a more basic level, were your students properly supported before entering the exam hall in terms of being adequately fed, hydrated, equipped and settled? What plans were in place in the event of severe disruptions on the day?

Only once this broader cultural reflection is complete should you then start thinking about the actual data. Tools such as Sisra enable staff to carry out detailed analysis, but the questions being asked need to be sharp and purposeful.

Did the students achieve their predicted grades? If not, why not? Answering such questions properly requires much more than mere surface-level commentary. Each case should be understood in context, with classroom teachers providing detailed insight into individual circumstances. These reports should then be reviewed at the head of department level and submitted to senior leadership.

Understanding the patterns

Patterns within departments should also be carefully interrogated. If a particular class or set underperformed against predictions, this could point to issues with marking accuracy, teaching approaches or curriculum delivery – or something else entirely.

Staffing factors should also be considered. Was there any instability due to supply cover? Were there attendance

"How well were routines established – the lining up, the maintenance of silence, the directives to remain on site?"

concerns within the group? Was a class unusually large? Any one of these variables could well have influenced your school's outcomes.

Where identified discrepancies seem to have been department-wide, a more substantial response will be required. Targeted CPD will need to be implemented, with a focus on carrying out accurate assessments, grading and curriculum alignment. Enough time and resource should be allocated for staff to revisit these fundamentals as needed.

The wider context

Comparisons beyond the school are equally important. How do outcomes align with national averages, or schools serving similar cohorts, and what are the reasons for this?

This should all be followed by a deeper level of analysis examining key student groups. Comparisons should be included between boys and girls, EAL/non-EAL students, SEND/non-SEND students and Pupil Premium versus non-Pupil Premium cohorts.

Focus on identifying any attainment gaps and quantifying them clearly. Often, you'll see a gap between those with and without certain needs, and will have to assess by how many grades (or fine points) those EAL, PP or SEN students are under.

What went well?

Within this, there is also an opportunity to identify strengths. If a teacher or class has outperformed trends – for example, by achieving particularly strong outcomes with SEND students – this ought to be explored and shared. Internal expertise can often be a powerful driver of improvement, so it's worth creating structures for this knowledge to be disseminated more widely, through faculty or whole-school CPD.

The final findings from this analysis should directly inform your Department Improvement Plan, so that future curriculum planning, resource development, staffing decisions and CPD priorities can all be aligned with the strengths and weaknesses identified.

At an individual level, heads of departments should meet with their teachers to review their outcomes. These conversations should encompass both celebration and challenge, and lead to clear, actionable targets.

Where one teacher has demonstrated strength in a particular area – such as improving outcomes for Pupil Premium students, for example – others should be given opportunities to observe and learn from that practice. Where one teacher's outcomes aren't quite as expected, they should be given opportunities to see how others are managing.

Towards a formal process

Across the system, however, approaches to post-GCSE analysis remain inconsistent. In some schools, senior leaders will lead the process. At others, it will be seen as the responsibility of heads of department or classroom teachers. This lack of uniformity can lead to gaps – particularly in cases where staff have left the school, with the consequence that their results go unanalysed.

One obvious solution to this is to formalise the process. The day immediately following GCSE results day should become a directed school day, with all teachers required to attend and complete a structured analysis of their classes. Where possible, this expectation should be extended to staff leaving at the end of that academic year.

A centralised system for capturing this information would ensure greater consistency and accountability. Crucially, it's an approach that would also address a common recurring issue, which is that by September, a school's focus will have typically shifted entirely to its new Y11 and Y7 cohorts, leading to the risk of last year's lessons getting lost.

Thorough documentation

Finally, there remains a need for schools to gather and analyse more substantive evidence throughout the year. Every Y11 teacher should maintain a live, working document that tracks their class. Any end-of-year comments along the lines of '*Poor attendance*' or '*Lack of effort*' will be insufficient without supporting detail.

Records should include attendance patterns, parental communications, details of revision session engagement and any specific interventions put in place – including how Pupil Premium funding was used, what EAL strategies were deployed and what targeted support was offered.

Without this level of detail, your post-exam season analysis will be reduced to guesswork. But with it, schools will find themselves better placed to understand their outcomes more fully, support their staff and ultimately improve results, which is what we all want.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Stoker is a former head of English and Marianne Eyles-Smith a former examiner; the two are co-founders of the tutoring service Smith and Stoker, further details of which can be found by visiting smithandstoker.co.uk or following @smith_and_stoker (Insta)

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KEEPING TRACK

In a subject that can be as dense and demanding as maths, how much time and effort should practitioners dedicate to the process of assessment? **Ama Dickson** offers her take…

Assessments help to inform teachers of where their students' strengths lie, and in which areas they might have gaps in their knowledge or hold misconceptions. Throughout the academic year, students will be introduced to a range of new concepts that they'll be expected to retain and apply in their end of year assessments, and indeed throughout their subsequent academic careers.

Assessing learners to ascertain what they do and don't understand can be conducted in a variety of ways, however – so to what extent should maths teachers assess learners' knowledge throughout the year, and what should those assessments look like in practice?

Cumulative learning

Maths is cumulative, with new knowledge and skills typically built atop of what's already been learnt. The ability to solve quadratic equations using the quadratic formula, for example, relies on having a good understanding of substitution. Knowing how to find equivalent fractions, and how to add and subtract fractions at KS3 forms the foundations needed to be able to simplify and solve equations with algebraic fractions at KS4.

Examples such as these can support the idea that maths teachers have a responsibility to assess learners daily, in order to measure students' achievement and inform their own teaching. Such daily assessments needn't require exam desks, timed conditions or feedback sheets, however. They can be carried out in the form of low stakes diagnostic checks, questioning, retrieval quizzes and exit tickets.

Formative assessments play an important role in the learning process. Diagnostic tests allow students to think hard about what they know, while enabling teachers to quickly identify misconceptions. With multiple choice diagnostic tests, after all, every answer option, barring the correct one, will reflect a misconception, thus giving teachers the chance to immediately correct these mistakes before continuing with the learning.

Types of questioning

Questioning is another effective way of assessing learners within the classroom, though the specific types of questions asked will be dependent on the teacher and their respective students. High order questions – which require answers involving some degree of analysis and explanation – serve to reveal a depth of understanding, and are thus better suited to more able learners.

Open questions, on the other hand, encourage creativity and promote deep thinking, giving teachers greater insights into learners' level of understanding. Questions that use formulations such as '*What is the same and what is different?*' will encourage learners to articulate their knowledge using tier 2 and tier 3 vocabulary.

Conversely, closed questions will typically have short, very specific answers – '*What is the area of this rectangle?*', for instance. The latter can be useful in giving maths teachers a way to quickly check for understanding, or when deployed as a tool for testing recall. Closed questions might not reveal *why* a learner has chosen that particular answer, but asking them will quickly

indicate to teachers whether learners possess a basic understanding of the topic in question and can recall the required information.

Another way of exposing misconceptions can be to pose questions with an '*Always, sometimes or never*' structure. For example: '*A quadratic equation has two solutions. Is this always, sometimes or never true?*'. These kinds of questions encourage discussion and can help to develop conceptual understanding. 'Spot the mistake' activities can meanwhile build students' skills at detecting common errors and knowledge of why they might occur.

"Maths teachers have a responsibility to assess learners daily"

Finally, a 'choose the odd one out' exercise can help to both check for understanding and reveal something of a student's thought processes, both of which may then help to encourage further discussion.

Retrieval practice

Retrieval questions, or quizzes, allow teachers to check for understanding of concepts learnt in past lessons that same week, the week prior or even during the previous term. Good retrieval questions will task students with recalling information stored in their long-term memory, bringing it into their working memory and applying it so that it's not forgotten.

Retrieval questions give teachers a way of asking probing questions, potentially via the 'pose/pause/pounce/bounce' method of questioning, which lets other learners in the classroom contribute to the knowledge being retold and reiterated. These will often used near the start of a lesson, as a 'Do now' task, but can, in fact, be put to effective use at any time during the class.

Exit tickets can help to assess whether learners have achieved a learning objective, and will typically be conducted at the end of a lesson as a short task. The results received will then help the teacher know conclusively which students achieved the intended lesson objectives and which might still need further practice.

When to go summative

Summative assessments are conducted under formal exam conditions and will provide evidence of attainment against the curriculum within a certain period. They usually take place at the end of a unit, term or academic year, and are generally seen as high stakes, given how the results may well determine a student's final grades or opportunities for progression to further study.

Ensuring that students are familiar with being assessed under exam conditions will, of course, help to prepare them for their GCSE exams later on. Sitting assessments under high pressure, timed conditions can induce acute stress among some students, but the more experience they have of such conditions, the better chance they'll have of being able to perform at a standard genuinely reflective of their knowledge and ability when the time comes.

Summative assessments also provide welcome opportunities for students to practice independent revision and consolidate their learning. Assessments conducted at the conclusion of a unit should mainly test students on just that unit alone, albeit with perhaps one or two retrieval questions from a different unit.

Termly assessments, on the other hand, should cover a mix of topics from across the term in question, while also drawing on the terms before and potentially even prior academic years. By the same token, end of year assessments should prioritise topics taught since the previous September, but could also include questions calling on knowledge learnt at an earlier stage, since it's this level of recall that students will need to demonstrate if they're to perform as well as possible in their final GCSE exams.

Feedback-driven improvements

Providing learners with feedback after each summative assessment is an integral part of their journey. Identifying those '*What went well*' and '*Even better ifs*', while giving them improvement tasks to follow will help students see more clearly where they have been able to demonstrate a good level of understanding, and which areas they may need to work on.

Modelling the answers to an assessment will further ensure that learners can identify precisely where and how they might have made a mistake, and in turn hopefully encourage them to complete an improvement task you've set, act on the feedback they've beem given and increase their chances of future success.

For maths teachers, the process of assessing their learners is a continuous one that plays an important part in their development. By carefully balancing formative and summative assessment, we can see to it that learners don't feel overwhelmed or overly stressed, but more informed and equipped to perform better next time.

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

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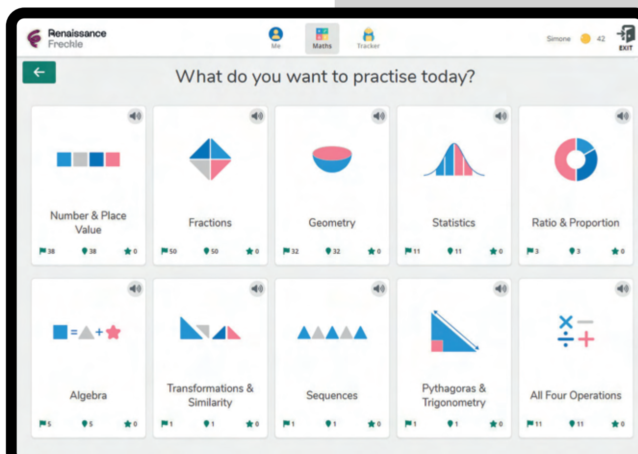

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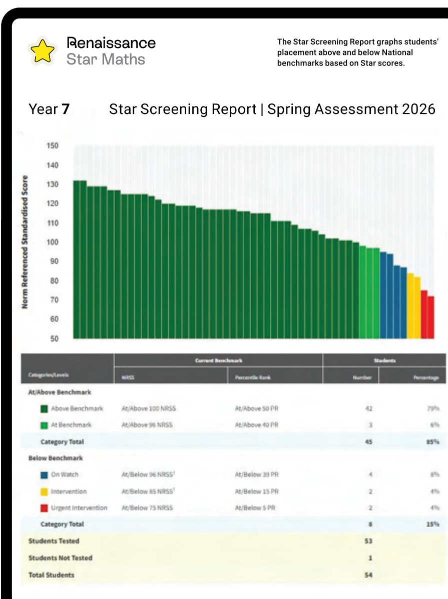

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Steal these lessons

Professor Dan Abramson breaks down the practice and approaches used by university maths schools, and how secondaries can make them their own

When Ofsted published its report on Cambridge Maths School in June 2026, the school was judged 'Exceptional' in every category, in what was the first such set of grades seen in the FE sector.

That's a remarkable achievement, and a powerful argument for taking the university maths school model seriously.

Excellence and equity

The report doesn't tell a story of 'hot-housing', or flag a narrow focus on exam preparation. Instead, inspectors recognised a 'deeply inclusive culture'; one in which students were able to make '*Excellent and sustained progress*', while enjoying '*constant debate and discussion in lessons*' and becoming '*highly skilled at problem-solving*'.

Too often, debates around maths education imply a false choice between stretching highly motivated learners and ensuring that students from all backgrounds feel they belong and can succeed. University maths schools show that excellence and equity aren't competing principles.

The first transferable lesson is that community isn't some soft extra, but part of the academic engine. Many students will arrive at a maths school having learnt to ration their enthusiasm. They like mathematics, sometimes intensely, but will also know when it's socially safe for them to admit enjoying a problem, or having watched a lecture on cryptography for fun.

Something then changes. They find others who also enjoy elegant solutions, careful arguments and interesting questions. One student's fascination with geometry rubs off on another. Someone brings in a problem from physics. The borders of 'maths' expand.

This shift marks the point at which students move from liking mathematics to *seeing themselves as mathematicians*. Once that identity forms, they'll take harder options and persist for longer.

A set of habits

This kind of culture has to be deliberately built, however. Strong mathematical cultures form when departments decide upon what they value most, then make those values visible.

Do we value asking precise questions? Spotting structures? Changing our minds? If so, do the students know that? Do we praise such behaviours, or only their speed and correctness?

In the best maths classrooms, students learn that the subject isn't a performance of instant cleverness, but rather a set of habits – conjecturing, testing, generalising, justifying and revising. That's a pivotal message for students, who might otherwise interpret finding something difficult as evidence that they don't belong there.

Spreading good ideas

We should also get students standing up and working together. One of the simplest, yet most powerful hallmarks of the classrooms found in many university maths schools is the sight of students working together in small groups using whiteboards. They talk, sketch, erase, restart and argue. The teacher can see the room's thinking at once. Misconceptions become visible and good ideas spread quickly.

Let's stop pretending that good maths teaching sits neatly inside a 'progressive' or 'traditionalist' box. Visitors to university maths schools will typically see inquiry, discussion and students wrestling with unfamiliar ideas. They may also see explicit instruction, carefully sequenced examples and a strong emphasis on technical fluency.

This isn't a contradiction. Carefully structured exploration matters, but so too does deep subject knowledge. The strongest teaching will combine both, via a curriculum that reveals the story of mathematics.

Explicit expectations

Finally, in truly equitable classrooms there's a recognition that good intentions aren't enough on their own. In many mixed classrooms boys will speak up more often, take up more airtime in discussions and be more readily recognised as 'the mathematicians'. If we fail to examine those patterns, we risk reproducing them.

That means making expectations explicit. Notice who speaks, who gets interrupted, whose ideas are taken up and who gets to be wrong safely. Think carefully about seating, grouping and routines. Avoid routinely placing one girl in a group of boys and assuming that 'inclusion' will look after itself.

None of this is unique to specialist maths schools. Mathematical excellence isn't simply a product of selecting high-attaining students; it grows from community, culture and classroom practices that help students think more deeply, take intellectual risks and feel that they belong.

What will it take for more students to see themselves as mathematicians? Other schools may find that the answer starts with a whiteboard, a problem and a classroom culture that says, '*You belong here...*'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Professor Dan Abramson OBE is CEO of uMaths - the University Maths Schools Network; for more information, visit umaths.ac.uk

Solid GEOMETRY

Kal Hodgson explains why the most illuminating and lasting geometry lessons are those that let students get hands on with the shapes being studied...

It was said that Plato's Academy had '*Let no-one ignorant of geometry enter here*' inscribed on its entrance. Whether that's true or not, it can't be disputed that geometry was the language of the ancient world, with geometric methods forming the basis of mathematical discourse and proof.

The curriculum of today looks very different to that of 2,000 years ago, of course. As Gerry Levresha noted in his 2008 book, *Crossing the Bridge*, geometry is now "*Designated as 'shape and space*'" – a linguistic change clearly pointing to how the subject has changed and developed to meet current thinking.

Appropriate practical work

Teaching geometry successfully requires negotiating a subtle and careful shift from the concrete to the abstract, from the specific to the general. In fact, this shift is what sits at the very heart of the subject of mathematics – '*How can we develop general results from our initial concrete examples?*'

In his seminal 1982 work, *Mathematics Counts*, W H Cockcroft noted that alongside teacher exposition, discussion, consolidation and problem solving, teaching should also provide opportunities for investigative work and appropriate practical work.

The key word here is '*appropriate*', because done well, such an approach can only strengthen and solidify geometric understanding.

This isn't learning by discovery, but rather a practical, teacher-led approach that will secure understanding of key concepts before moving on to more abstract ideas.

One approach is to study with care the properties of quadrilaterals, and to use concrete examples to build to more general ideas. The point to bear in mind is the importance of accuracy, since the greatest danger of any practical approach to geometry is the risk of producing invalid or inaccurate thinking as a result of inaccurate measurements.

Geometrical classification

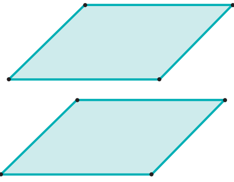
In the first lesson, the teacher should supply the class with a sheet of card paper on which is drawn a quadrilateral (or even one already cut out) so that the students' eventual results can be as accurate as possible. (see fig. 1).

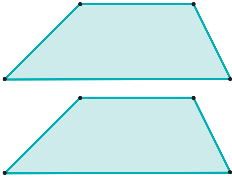
By using two of each quadrilateral, students can place objects side by side, or on top of each other, using the concept of congruence to demonstrate how, for example, two sides are equal. What may feel like a practical activity actually has roots in rigorous mathematical ideas.

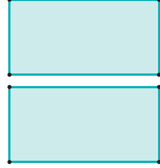
These physical shapes allow

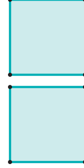
	Quadrilateral	Square	Rectangle	Parallelogram	Rhombus	Kite	Isosceles Trapezium	Trapezium	Arrowhead
Number of lines of symmetry	4	2							
Order of rotational symmetry	4	2							
Order of rotational symmetry	✔	✔							
Diagonals equal	✔	✔							
Diagonals cross at right angles	✔	✖							
Diagonals bisect each other	✔	✔							
Diagonals bisect the angles	✔	✖							
Sides	4 equal and parallel sides	2 pairs of equal (parallel) sides							
Angles	4 right angles	4 right angles							

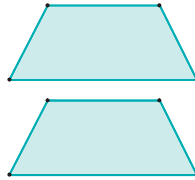
fig. 2

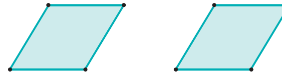


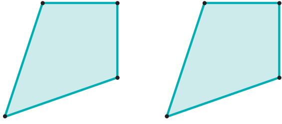












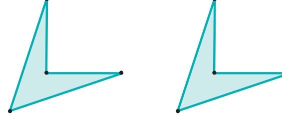


fig. 1

for a range of concepts to be taught, such as reflective and rotational symmetry, but at the simplest level they can be used to observe and record the properties of a shape. By comparing, folding and measuring, students can complete a table (see the example with the first two rows completed shown in fig. 2) that lets them take their first steps into geometrical classification.

This can be set as a pure, students-led investigation, but will be of greater value if students are guided through demonstration so that they understand how to manipulate the shapes, compare them, fold or rotate them, and how to confirm suggested results.

Those results will require an understanding of angular measure – such as there being 90˚ in a right angle, for example – and an awareness of terms such as 'bisect' and 'symmetry', but the table can be adapted as the teacher sees fit. The completed table forms the basis for exemplars that will be abstracted in later lessons.

Dynamic images

These shapes – particularly the parallelogram – can then be used to establish other important ideas. Placing two parallelograms end to end allows us to demonstrate that alternate angles are equal. The line where the two parallelograms touch is the transversal, and because we know the parallelograms are congruent, the two marked angles are equal (see fig. 3).

Other geometrical properties can and should be demonstrated using physical manipulation. The three corners of any paper triangle can be ripped off and placed to form a straight line, demonstrating that the angles of a triangle sum to 180˚. Similarly, any paper quadrilateral can be used to demonstrate that the angles sum to 360˚ by doing the same thing with that shape's corners. (see fig. 4)

Of course, what has been demonstrated to students so far are specific examples of the geometric facts we want to teach, but they can be developed and explored in later lessons through the use of dynamic software, such as GeoGebra (see geogebra.org).

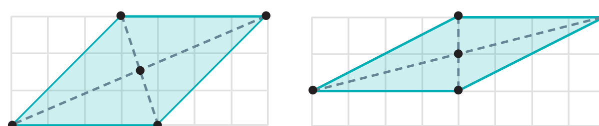
Once set up, the dynamic image can be configured to demonstrate invariance under transformation – i.e. a property that isn't specific to one diagram, but general to all shapes.

In fig. 5, for example, we see a parallelogram that's been manipulated in order to demonstrate that the diagonals will always bisect each other.

fig. 3

fig. 4

fig. 5



Stepping into the abstract

Once the concepts of parallel lines and equality have been demonstrated and discussed, notation that signifies two parallel lines (such as arrows), or two lines of equal length (e.g. hatch marks), can be introduced and formalised. By doing this, the teacher is now taking a further step into the abstract for students.

If we begin by using textbook images for shapes – or even worse, badly drawn images on a whiteboard – we're allowing students the opportunity to develop misconceptions related to those diagrams, such as believing a rhombus is only a rhombus in one orientation. To avoid this, we can instead start with physical objects that students can manipulate, before shifting through visual manipulatives via dynamic software and then eventually landing on more abstract formal notation.

This distinction – between the properties of one triangle and all triangles, for example – is the moment where the specific becomes the general, and where the concrete finally become the abstract.

It's easy to teach geometry as a series of unconfirmed facts that students must remember, but this approach fails to properly embed the rigour necessary for true abstract thinking. By starting with concrete manipulatives, the brave teacher can develop understanding more deeply, and for longer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kal Hodgson has spent over 30 years in education at a range of different schools, variously as a leader of mathematics, SCITT leader, senior leader and headteacher; he is currently an assistant vice principal at a school in Manchester

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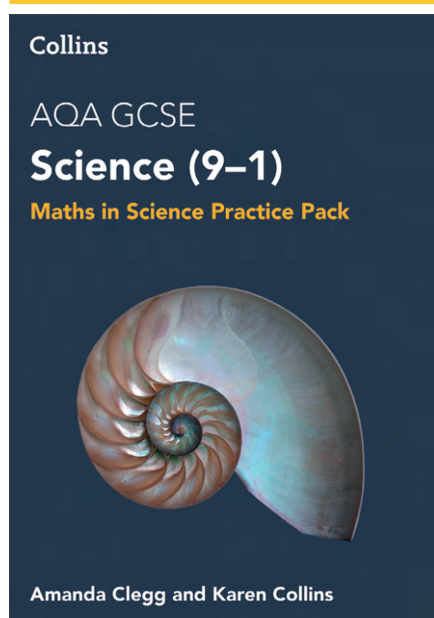

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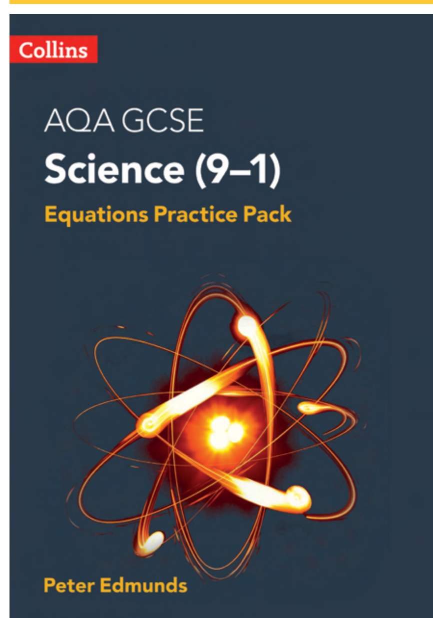

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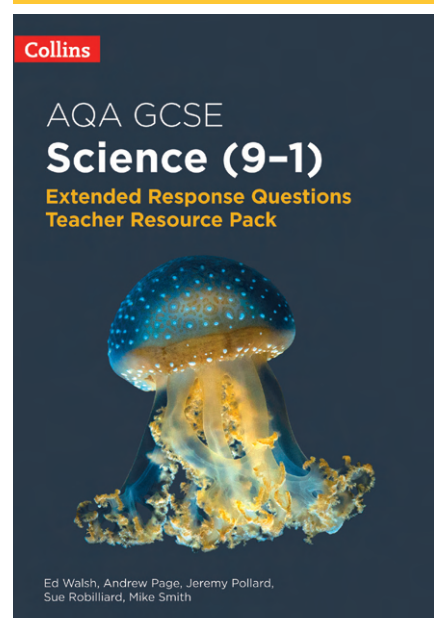

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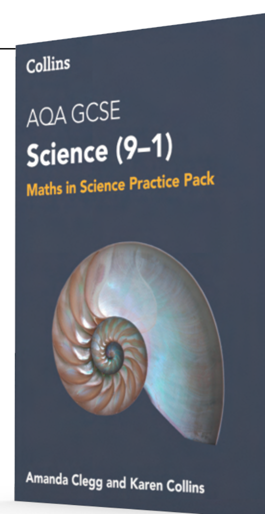

AT A GLANCE

- **A no-nonsense resource for targeting deficits in applying maths skills in the study of science**
- **Shows how maths skills can be applied to exam-style science problems**
- **Includes an accompanying set of PowerPoint slides for presenting to students**
- **Includes access to downloadable and editable versions of all provided questions, answers and worked examples**

REVIEW BY MIKE DAVIES

"When will I ever use the maths I learnt at school in real life?"

So goes the clichéd question posed by countless comedians and online influencers. When not playing for laughs, though, most of us will readily recognise just how important the appliance of maths is within the study of science. Sadly, however, it would seem that knowledge gained in the maths classroom doesn't always easily transfer across to science lessons, even for those who perform well in the former.

That's an observation supported by research, and one way in which this *Maths in Science Practice Pack* from Collins impresses from the get-go is how its very creation is backed by some of that research, as clearly cited in its introduction.

GCSE and A Level students alike can encounter real blocks when it comes to the maths component of their science exams. It's a problem that's becoming more widely recognised, and one that this resource seeks to address head-on.

Collins' approach involves giving concise descriptions of specific maths skills, providing worked examples for teachers to talk through and then following these with 'faded' examples – a form of scaffolding, in which the steps for solving a problem are gradually removed from the bottom up. The material for each skill area then concludes with a set of problems for students to solve by themselves.

Said skill areas are grouped into five broad categories: 'arithmetic'; 'handling data'; 'algebra'; 'graphs and geometry'; and 'trigonometry'. Each skill is applied separately to each branch of science – biology, chemistry and physics. The worked examples are presented via PowerPoint slides designed with 'stepped reveal' sequences, to support teachers in modelling how to solve them. The pack even includes access to downloadable and fully editable versions of all the questions presented in the main book, the answers to which can be found at the back.

This is no needlessly fluffy and colourful resource. Instead, the emphasis throughout is on clarity, with an overall presentation that's beautifully designed around two key objectives: identifying gaps in students' skill sets, and then targeting those gaps in a direct manner that eliminates all other variables. It's an aptly scientific way of going about things.

My only real regret with this product is that there was nothing like it around when I was at school. While I genuinely enjoyed science, and wasn't too bad at maths, I can still remember being flummoxed by a couple of nasty exam questions that tasked me with applying my maths knowledge to science problems – which is perhaps that's why I ended up becoming a writer, rather than a proper scientist...

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An education in THE ESSENTIALS

Andy Hewitt explains why school visits to sites of key infrastructure can be just as important and educationally nourishing as the more traditional museum trip...

Textbook learning, presentations, practical-based workshops – all have their essential place in a design and make curriculum, but the realisation and contextualisation of seeing real-world systems operating at scale can be uniquely impactful to aspiring students.

Consequently, schools should strive to place greater emphasis on visits to key infrastructure sites – particularly those with a societal responsibility, such as power stations, weather defences and water treatment plants.

Enriching opportunities

The importance of visits to such locations can sometimes be overlooked, especially when compared to the more obvious and traditional appeal of museums or historical landmarks. At the risk of sounding somewhat clichéd, these locations can offer enriching opportunities to bring learning to life, and inspire young learners to pursue careers that are somewhat obscured from mass public awareness, but nevertheless essential to the smooth running of society.

Infrastructure visits provide an abundance of positive outcomes, but one of the most impactful is how they can showcase an authentic context for learning. In D&T and engineering we're frequently tasked with imparting knowledge to students on problem-solving principles such as systems, processes, materials and sustainability. While students may grasp the theory of such notions, and perform well in an end-of-term summative assessment, they can struggle to appreciate how these are applied in the real world.

When studying the topic of environmental management, a visit to a local water treatment facility can convert those theoretical discussions into practical realities. Students get to witness the true scale of the challenges that teams of industry experts must overcome each day in order to supply millions of people with clean water efficiently and consistently.

Likewise, a visit to a power station will provide illuminating insights into the areas of energy generation, resource management, automation and control systems. Students will acquire a better understanding of how electricity reaches their homes than what can be conveyed from a wordy paragraph in a textbook, or a simplified illustration in a revision guide.

Civic awareness

Infrastructure can also be easy to take for granted, as it tends to be operated largely behind the scenes. These visits can instil a greater sense of civic awareness among students, by showcasing how much of modern life depends on these systems being able to run reliably.

Of course, infrastructure visits further provide a tangible reality for students, enabling them to witness engineers, technicians and operators at work, demonstrating how high-skilled workers maintain and improve the systems that support our way of life.

Seldom do these industry sites operate independently from one another. Immersive experiences, such as educational visits, can help reveal the integrated fabric of modern society. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics are frequently grouped together in education settings as 'STEM subjects', but visits to sites within those fields of study can demonstrate in much clearer and more practical ways specifically how these disciplines combine together to solve practical problems.

In the context of energy provision – whether it's a nuclear facility, wind farm or solar installation – students can witness the successful integration of mechanical systems, electrical systems, computer controls, environmental considerations and human decision-making. An interdisciplinary approach such as this is even more important now than in previous generations, due to the growing challenges of climate change and energy dependency.

Career inspiration

As an educator with a multi-faceted role, my goal isn't to just try and impart

knowledge, but also to *inspire*. Career inspiration is another compelling reason for schools to prioritise infrastructure visits. Your students will already be quite familiar with careers in medicine and even law, simply because they're exposed to them regularly in their everyday livs. By contrast, those same students will have far less exposure to utilities industries and infrastructure management.

The general lack of awareness of what these industries do can have severe consequences – most notably in the context of skills shortages, which has been an ongoing concern across STEM-based industries, given recent recruitment and retention figures. According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 43% of STEM vacancies are hard to fill, mainly due to applicants not possessing the required skills or experience.

This skills gap is especially pronounced in industries such as defence, aerospace and energy. Research recently commissioned by The National Grid revealed that in order to meet net-zero targets, the sustainable energy industry will need to expand its workforce by an additional 400,000 before 2050.

It's a similar picture in other countries, with the energy production, water management and environmental protection sectors, among others, reporting an ageing workforce with sub-par recruitment figures. If students are never shown the kind of work that goes on such industries, is it any surprise if they're less likely to then pursue them as potential careers?

> **"These visits can instil a greater sense of civic awareness among students"**

Interconnected skills

Immersive school trips are one way of addressing some of the challenges faced by these industries, since they introduce students to a wide range of different professions that they may not have otherwise considered.

Through them, students can witness first-hand and begin to appreciate how modern infrastructure depends on having a workforce built up from skill-based diversity. The end result of an architectural project, for example, isn't just wholly reliant on having enough civil engineers; it's an accumulation of effort and labour contributed by many other specialisms too, including electrical engineers, environmental scientists, data analysts, surveyors and health and safety professionals, all collaborating together on a single project.

By visiting these sites, students can reach a better realisation of the *many* skills needed to work in close collaboration with partners from different trades and specialisms. It helps them see the interconnected nature between what they're learning about in the classroom and its real world applications. And it's hugely important that students get to meet with professionals who can explain how they themselves moved beyond the learning they did during their own time at school, and how they applied what they learnt over the course of their career progression.

We also can't ignore the fact that there are some stubborn stereotypes that still persist around certain engineering industries, and which continue to shape the demographics of those choosing to enter them. Visits to infrastructure sites can help to dismantle said stereotypes, and help students vividly see how many outdated perceptions no longer have a place within modern facilities. Instead, students can interact with role models from different backgrounds, some of whom may be able to share their own experiences and explain the direction that their career paths have taken.

Technological creativity

D&T is a creative subject that has an inherent 'wow factor' – especially when students can demonstrate their theoretical understanding by creating a practical outcome.

'Creative flair' and 'problem solving' might not be attributes that students readily associate with infrastructure, yet for all the pragmatic and functional purpose of power stations and water treatment plants, they can and do serve to highlight the need for imagination and creative thinking when it comes to overcoming complex societal needs.

Indeed, the technological sectors are constantly innovating because they *have* to, because of the persistent need to always be developing and refining new processes and procedures.

Admittedly, it can't be denied that despite the strong case in favour of immersing students in infrastructure sites, actually doing so usually entails having to negotiate a series of administrative and logistical hurdles, on top of an already intense admin workload. There's the substantial planning involved, the need for risk assessments, allocation of staffing need, transportation costs and embedding of appropriate safeguarding policies, to name but a few.

There's also the need to secure collaboration with industry partners if the trip is to even happen in the first place. Thankfully, many infrastructure organisations run outreach programmes that target educational groups and can help you provide memorable experiences for your students that deliver good educational returns.

Amid the pursuit of education centres that provide enhanced curriculums to challenge and develop students for their future careers, the importance of visiting key infrastructure sites can't be understated. Such visits have a very high quality educational value and can do a great deal to promote interdisciplinary learning – and what better way is there of doing that than by immersing students in real-world contexts they can see in action and interact with?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Andy Hewitt is a D&T and engineering teacher

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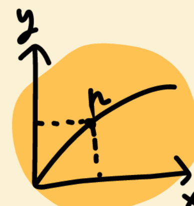

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HANNAH DAY
Art, media and film studies teacher

Thinking about ...

VOTES AT 16

When the UK next holds a general election, in 2029 at the latest, 16- and 17-year-olds could be voting for the first time – a major shift in British political history. Supporters of lowering the voting age argue that it could strengthen democracy by encouraging civic participation earlier, and giving young people a direct voice in decisions that will shape their futures. Critics, however, wonder whether teenagers have enough life experience to make informed political choices.

So how confident do young people feel about their ability to make informed voting decisions? In April this year, The Economist Educational Foundation carried out a national survey of more than 4,000 students aged 10 to 17 (see tinyurl.com/ts155-LL1). 44% of those surveyed said they would *not* feel ready to vote in the next election.

For some teachers working directly with young people, the picture is more complex. As Helen Blachford, curriculum leader for citizenship and PSHE at Priory School in Hampshire, explains, "*Many of my GCSE citizenship students are engaged politically, and are more politically aware and educated than a lot of adults. They have strong opinions on what they're seeing on the news or on social media, but recognise they don't have enough understanding of those issues.*"

Similarly, Beth Logan – deputy director of faculty and an English teacher at Tibshelf Community School in Derbyshire – believes teenagers become more aware of the responsibilities of adulthood as they grow older: "*When students reach 15, it hits home that perhaps they're not as mature as they expected to be, and don't feel prepared for some of the responsibilities that come their way – and voting is another responsibility they have to face up to.*"

When asked about the issues most likely to influence their voting decisions, 70% mentioned the cost of living. Other issues included healthcare (52%), education (33%) and immigration (31%). Issues such as climate change, global conflict and social care, however, ranked much lower, suggesting that young people's political priorities are shaped more by immediate economic pressures than broader global concerns, which could offer an interesting starting point for classroom debate.

Young people need opportunities to discuss political ideas, yet teachers often find it hard to organise such discussions, especially when the topics in question are sensitive. The government's proposed National Curriculum reforms, which would see greater emphasis placed on citizenship, media literacy and democratic education from the primary phase onwards, would be a step in the right direction.

"*Sometimes students simply haven't had what they need to spark their curiosity,*" observes Beth Logan. "*It only takes that one interesting lesson or talk to light the touchpaper and get them thinking about politics in a whole new light.*"

If voting at 16 does indeed become a reality, then schools will have an increasingly important responsibility – not to tell students what to think, but to help them become informed critical thinkers who feel confident in having their say.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Flora Letanka is a former teacher and CEO at The Economist Educational Foundation – an independent charity backed by The Economist; for more information, visit economistfoundation.org

FOCUS ON...
Budgeting for SEND

The government reports that 1.7million pupils now have a SEND diagnoses. That amounts to an increase of 5.6% since last year.

New research has revealed the scale of the SEND challenges schools are facing if they're to meet this increased demand. 89% of school leaders blame a lack of finance, limited access to specialist support and gaps in staff confidence and training. 70% also report that the pressures of meeting demand for SEND support has had at least a moderate effect on staff workload and wellbeing.

AMBITIOUS PLANS

Given that there's an even greater need for SEND expertise on the horizon, effective training is needed now more than ever to ensure that students will be able access appropriate support. In February of this year, the government announced plans for a series of transformative reforms to the SEND system in its 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' White Paper.

Said reforms include expanding the existing SEND system by placing 6,500 more expert teachers in secondary schools, special schools and FE colleges. £200 million has also been promised to support specialist teacher training, which will be crucial if children with additional education needs are to receive the education they deserve, and help to reduce the financial pressures on state-funded schools to deliver adequate SEND training from their existing budgets.

However, many schools already face barriers to delivering this, with a number of education experts concerned by issues that continue to affect essential teacher recruitment, never mind the availability of specialist support.

BARRIERS TO DELIVERY

A report by Commercial Services Group (see tinyurl.com/ts155-LL2) has found that while 89% of parents remain happy with their child's education and have strong confidence in teaching quality, 95% of secondary schools have achieved this through reduced spending over the past year. This may reflect well on the standards and commitment of UK education specialists, but it isn't a sustainable path forward.

These internal pressures are contributing to significant challenges in staff wellbeing, recruitment and retention. Education leaders we work with have told us directly that ongoing resource challenges have made it difficult to continue delivering high-quality education while simultaneously implementing essential reforms. As a result, 29% of school leaders say they lack confidence in their ability to recruit and retain staff.

LACK OF INVESTMENT,

If investment in SEND training falls short, the government risks both losing teachers due to the stress of mounting classroom pressures, and having to increasingly rely on expensive specialist schools.

Between 2016 and 2025, the number of pupils with EHCPs attending these independent schools tripled, from 10,000 to 30,000. The per-pupil costs of attending these schools are significantly higher than in state schools, estimated at an average of £62,000, compared with £24,000.

If we're to avoid such mounting costs and enable teachers to actually do their jobs, then it's critical that sufficient investment in teacher training be made now. The measures set out in the government's White Paper have been broadly supported by school leaders, but such is the state of the system currently that there are real concerns over how much meaningful change can be delivered.

When considering the long-term impact these measures are likely to have on education, the proof will be in the spending...

KELLY SOUTHEY IS ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, COMMERCIAL AND ADVISORY AT THE EDUCATION PEOPLE – A COMMERCIAL SERVICES GROUP BRAND; FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT THEEDUCATIONPEOPLE.ORG

DO THIS
WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN

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

Don't let previous misbehaviour negatively influence how you treat students in the current lesson. Instead, be warm, welcoming and make sure they get the same opportunities to contribute as all other students. In other words, wipe the slate clean every lesson.

This doesn't mean you should forget about previous misbehaviour, however. It's entirely appropriate to be warm, welcoming and inclusive, and to also remind students of your behaviour expectations. By taking this dual approach – clean slate, plus clear expectations – you set the student up for success.

When delivering CPD to schools, I'll often ask teachers about their best teacher when

they were children. I get lots of lovely responses, the most common describing these teachers as '*Firm but fair*', '*Strict*', '*A good person*', '*Able to control the room*', '*Kind*' and '*Approachable*'. These combined responses paint a consistent picture – that the best teachers are decent people who can take charge of a classroom and make it a calm, safe place for learning. So aim for thatrelationship style. Not only is it effective, there's also a good chance that it's what your students will prefer...

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

80%

of primary and secondary teachers across England say that allowing students to consume unhealthy food at break and lunchtimes can lead to disruptive behaviour.

Source: Teacher Tapp Survey of approximately 6,000 teachers commissioned by The Food Foundation

Researchers at UCL have published a study in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, in which it's claimed that around 30% of all private school bursaries and scholarship funds go to the wealthiest families. Pupils from lower income families, on the other hand, receive less grant funding than those from both high- and middle-income families.

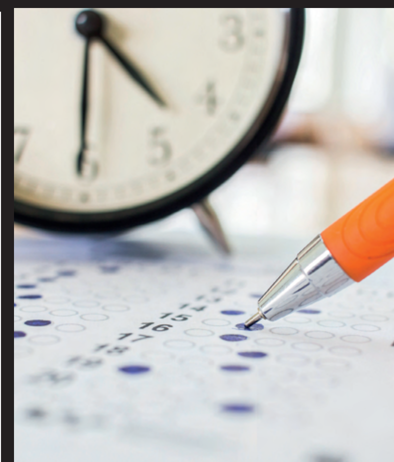
The study is based on an analysis of nationally representative UK household finance data spanning 25 years, from 1997/8 to 2023/24. The team found that lower-income families receive 17% of all grant funds, compared to the 30% awarded to high income families and the 18% received by middle-income families.

The researchers also observed that rapid increases in school fees had resulted in a steady decline in the value of said grant funds, which covered 57% of school fees between 1997 and 2000, but only 27% of fees between 2021 and 2024.

According to the study's co-author, Professor Francis Green, "*Bursaries and scholarships are claimed to be the primary means for independent schools to temper elements of their social exclusivity – which, with average school fees being 58% of median disposable household income, are out of reach for most families. Our research, however, shows that while such support has become more common in the last 25 years, it has relatively diminished in scale and remains very limited in its effectiveness in reaching children from less affluent backgrounds.*"

CLOSE-UP ON...

THE 11 PLUS' HIDDEN LEGACY



There's no single pathway to success. Families make their educational choices with great care, balancing aspirations, opportunities and what feels right for their child at a particular stage of development.

Yet amidst conversations about assessments, admissions and destinations, there's another question worth asking – what do children gain when given the freedom to spend their junior years exploring, questioning and discovering who they are as learners, without the pressure of a high-stakes assessment?

For some children, particularly those preparing for selective 11-plus entrance assessments, the latter years of junior or prep education can involve a significant focus on exam preparation. This process helps develop some valuable qualities, such as discipline, perseverance, time management and the ability to perform under pressure. The commitment shown by pupils, families and teachers during the 11-plus process should never be underestimated.

Yet at the same time, there will inevitably be less time available for those broader experiences that can help children discover their interests and develop confidence as learners. Opportunities for deeper learning, extended projects, creative exploration, collaborative problem-solving and intellectual risk-taking become more limited when one specific and narrow outcome looms large.

This matters, because confidence in learning is about far more than just producing the right answers. It's about being willing to tackle difficult tasks, share ideas that are still forming and persevere when success seems uncertain. These habits of mind aren't developed through instruction alone but emerge gradually, through experience.

It's also important to consider the experiences of those pupils who don't achieve the outcome they'd hoped for. For some, the 11-plus can carry considerable emotional significance. While many entrants go on to thrive in a range of educational settings, disappointment at such a young age can influence how a child sees themselves as a learner. Children are resilient, but the messages they absorb around success, failure and self-worth during their formative years can stay with them for far longer than we might imagine.

None of this is intended as a criticism of selective education, nor of the dedicated teachers and families who navigate the process each year. Rather, it's a reminder that education shapes not just what children *know*, but also how they think, learn and understand themselves.The challenge for all schools is to ensure that whatever pathways pupils take, they'll continue to develop the qualities that underpin lifelong learning. Curiosity, creativity, resilience and independence matter just as much as academic achievement. An education should provide opportunities for pupils to ask questions without knowing the answers, and discover strengths that might never appear on a test paper.

When schools create environments in which these qualities are valued, young people will start to see learning not as a series of hurdles, but as an ongoing process of discovery.

SASHA DAVIES IS HEAD OF RADNOR HOUSE PREP, WHICH WILL JOIN RADNOR HOUSE SENIOR TO BECOME KNELLER HALL SCHOOL IN SEPTEMBER 2026

£38 billion

Amount of capital investment pledged by the government from 2025/26 until 2029/30 for its Education Estates Strategy, aimed at renewing school and college buildings

Source: DfE

Need to know

A new study by the National Foundation for Educational Research has identified a link between lower life satisfaction and higher rates of school absence among pupils in England, especially among girls.

Absence rates are currently higher compared to pre-pandemic levels, averaging at 8.4% in secondary schools in 2024/25 versus 5.5% in 2018/19. The study's authors analysed linked data from the 2022 PISA outcomes and the National Pupil Database, focusing on relations between the life satisfaction, sense of belonging at school and absence rates among 15-year-olds.

The responses to one specific PISA question from a scale of 0 to 10 – '*Overall, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?*' – were used to gauge students' wellbeing, from which it emerged that lower scores coincided with higher absence rates, becoming ever stronger as those absence rates increased.

From this, the study's authors have suggested that student wellbeing could have a a key role to play in understanding the reasons for persistent absence. The seemingly stronger link between the two seen in girls may in turn indicate that other factors might be more responsible for the attendance patterns seen among boys.

The full study can be downloaded via tinyurl.com/ts155-LL3

THE ART FILES...
SUPERSIZED CELEBRATIONS

Hannah Day explores the connections and contrasts between two artworks sharing similar themes – one older and one contemporary...

- **Henri Mattise, 'The Parakeet and the Mermaid' (1952)**
- **Beatriz Milhazes, 'Alem do Horizonte' (2025)**

Both Mattise and Milhazes are known for large-scale works which, when placed into rooms, create new environments that envelope and transport you.

In 'The Parakeet and the Mermaid' (above), produced when Mattise was experiencing periods of ill health, he created a garden that was intended to replace another he could no longer access. Covering two walls, the cutouts were simply pinned at first, leaving the paper to move in the breeze.

In 'Alem do Horizonte' (below), Milhazes creates both a chapel-like space and a celebration of Rio de Janeiro, her home city. She talks of feelings being part of the visual experience, in the same way that a religious space can transport us beyond the materials of the space.

In class, it might not be realistic to have the students all individually create comparably large works, but corridor areas can potentially accommodate such pieces – particularly at KS3, where a lack of exam board requirements can enable students to work collaboratively.

Ask students to list their most precious places and sketch out related ideas, shapes and colours. Newspaper can be painted as part of a colour theory lesson, each student starting with a base colour of their choice before building the pigments bit-by-bit by adding blue, red or yellow, painting a full page each time. Once several sheets are completed, add white or black – again, incrementally – to the growing number of pages.

Start the next lesson with sheets having dried. Shapes can be cut, arranged and pinned, while sharing the different colours with members of the class. The final work will thus be everyone's, and help to create a new immersive space.

If you'd prefer to avoid group work then you could create small-scale pieces, with double pages creating riots of colour and form. Either way, every student can create a new celebratory environment based on what's important to them – be it compact or supersized...

HANNAH DAY IS A TEACHER OF ART, MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES

On the radar *Character education*

Could character education – lessons based around the teaching of positive traits such as self-discipline, resilience and kindness, among others – be a driver of better GCSE results? A new study produced by the University of Birmingham suggests that it might be, having found that schools awarded the Association for Character Education's Quality Mark (QM) or Quality Mark Plus (QM+) consistently performed above expectations in GCSE exams relative to other schools in England.

Using Progress 8 scores to compare academic progress, the researchers found that the difference between QM+ and Non-QM schools over several years amounted to more than half a GCSE grade per pupil, averaged across subjects.

According to Dr Shane McLoughlin, associate professor of character education at the University of Birmingham, "*Until this study, the evidence linking intentional character education with academic outcomes was generally considered limited. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine this question across an entire national school system, using data from thousands of schools and millions of pupils.*

"*The findings suggest that helping pupils wrestle with enduring and increasingly urgent questions about what it means to be both good and human does not need to displace academic achievement.*"

The study additionally drew on survey data submitted by staff at QM and QM+ schools to examine how character education might have contributed to those schools' outcomes. The benefits to pupils cited by respondents included improved behaviour and motivation, increased perseverance, a greater ability to focus and a strengthened sense of wellbeing and school belonging.

TRENDING

Our pick of the recent resources and launches teachers might find useful...

TAKING ACTION

The NASUWT and the feminist campaigning organisation UK Feminista have embarked on a joint research project aimed at uncovering the impact of online misogyny and pornography in education settings, and submitting recommendations to inform both national policy and wider education practice. Their findings and recommendations are expected to be published in 2027.

ENGINEERING FOR EVERYONE

UK Education has opened a bursary scheme intended to assist UK schools with inspiring groups traditionally under-represented in engineering to take up the subject. The £700 bursaries can be used to fund an activity hosted on the Neon platform (neonfutures.org.uk) or to host a Big Bang at School event that includes engineering workshops and project work.
eukeducation.org.uk/funding

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT...
ENJOYMENT OF READING

Research by The National Literacy Trust has identified an uptick in levels of reading enjoyment and daily reading habits among young people – the first such rise to be recorded in five years. One year on from reading enjoyment hitting a 20-year low, an NLT survey conducted among 125,375 5- to 18-year-olds found that 36.1% of those aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed reading in their free time (compared to 32.7% in 2025) and that 20.3% read daily in their free time – up from 18.7%.

On a less positive note, the figures also point to a widening 'disadvantage gap', with enjoyment levels and daily reading habits increasing more among those students not receiving free school meals than those who do. The only group exhibiting a year-on-year decline in reading enjoyment were 5- to 8-year-olds, from 62.6% to 61.6%.

The survey further found that 48.7% of all respondents said that reading had helped them to further explore their interests. In terms of where their motivation to pick up a book came from, 65.8% of all respondents said that they were encouraged to read by their teachers and 54.8% by their parents.

Commenting on the findings, NLT chief executive Jonathan Douglas CBE said: "*To build on this momentum beyond 2026, we must continue to invest in what we know works – championing reading for enjoyment in our homes, schools and communities, and supporting more young people to see reading as a relevant, meaningful and fun part of everyday life.*"

Got a great learning idea? Email editor@teachsecondary.com or tweet us at @teachsecondary

When the tech works, THEY WORK

The devices used to support students with SEND play a critical role in their eventual outcomes – which is why new research into the reliability of such devices should concern us all...

For SEND students, reliable technology doesn't just help them complete tasks – it changes how they see themselves as learners. Now, new research has revealed why consistency matters more than features, training and even cost.

Ask a secondary teacher what their biggest technology worry is for SEND students and the answer won't be cost, training or device shortages. It's simpler than that – the technology that's supposed to help *doesn't always work*. And when it doesn't, the students who pay the heaviest price will be the ones who can least afford to.

An equity problem

That's the central finding of a new research report, 'Building Confidence, Enabling Success', commissioned by ASUS Education and based on a survey of 800 secondary teachers across the UK. It's a study that starts with a deceptively practical question – '*How does device reliability affect SEND students?*' – and arrives somewhere uncomfortable. Because device reliability, it turns out, isn't a technical problem at all. It's an equity problem.

That conclusion carries particular weight in the wake of the government's recently published education White Paper, 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving'. Among its proposals is the introduction of a statutory duty for digital Individual Support Plans for every child with identified SEND, backed by £1.6bn for a new Inclusive Mainstream Fund. Schools will be expected to do more for SEND students more generally, largely through digital delivery.

Whether the devices needed are already in classrooms and reliable enough is a question the White Paper doesn't answer. This research does.

> "When a device fails, the accommodation disappears; there's no partial workaround when the text-to-speech software crashes"

A hidden dependency

More than 1.7 million pupils in England now receive some form of SEND support. Over 482,000 hold Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) – twice the number of a decade ago. In the classrooms where the teachers surveyed work every day, nearly two thirds are teaching students with dyslexia, and three fifths are working with pupils on the autism spectrum. Half are teaching students with ADHD or anxiety disorders.

For most of these students, technology has become quietly essential. By that, we don't mean specialist assistive technology requiring expensive procurement decisions, but basic digital tools. Office software. Digital planners. Keyboards students can use instead of pens.

These are the accommodations that make classroom participation possible for many SEND pupils, and they depend entirely on one condition – that the devices in question actually work. When a device fails, the accommodation disappears. There's no partial workaround when the text-to-speech software crashes.

What actually happens

The statistics in the report are worth sitting with. More than half of teachers say that when technology fails, their SEND students become frustrated or anxious about using it again. Over half observe disruption to established learning routines. Nearly 2 in 5 watch pupils lose confidence in their ability to complete the task at hand. 3 in 10 see students fall behind lesson objectives – not because of

KEY FINDINGS:

BUILDING CONFIDENCE, ENABLING SUCCESS

54%

of teachers see SEND students' learning disrupted by technology failures at least two to three times a month

55%

report frustration or anxiety in SEND students following device failures; 38% observe a loss of confidence

97%

of teachers report seeing SEND student confidence grow when they have reliable access to digital tools

63%

of teachers rank consistent, reliable performance as their top priority when choosing devices for SEND students. Only 13% prioritise lowest cost

2 HOURS 20 MINUTES PER WEEK

Average time spent by teachers troubleshooting technology for students with SEND

their SEND needs, but because the tool designed to address those needs has stopped working.

Over time, something more serious develops. 2 in 5 teachers report SEND students starting to avoid technology-based tasks and 13% describe a clear pattern of withdrawal. This matters, because the direction of travel is towards more digital integration, not less. Homework, assessments and resources now arrive online. A student who's learned to distrust classroom technology is one who's being shut out.

The contrast with mainstream students is telling. When a device crashes mid-essay, a student without SEND can, if needs be, simply pick up a pen and carry on.

A student with dysgraphia doesn't have that option. A student with working memory difficulties may lose their train of thought in the delay. A student with anxiety may find the disruption severe enough to derail the rest of the lesson for them. The same failure can land very differently depending on who it happens to.

The invisible cost

The report also documents what this costs teachers. In a typical week, secondary staff will spend an additional 2 hours and 20 minutes troubleshooting technology for SEND students; time not spent teaching, planning or marking, but on resolving tech problems. In a school with a hundred SEND students spread across multiple teachers, that can swiftly add up to hundreds of hours a year.

The effects of this may reach further into lesson planning than most school leaders probably realise. 4 in 10 teachers maintain backup plans specifically for anticipated technology failures. 1 in 10 report regularly modifying or abandoning lessons altogether because they're not confident that the required technology will hold up. Only 13% plan lessons on the straightforward assumption that the devices will function as anticipated.

That last figure deserves a pause. Fewer than 1 in 8 secondary teachers plan their SEND provision on the assumption that any required technology will simply work.

What changes when it works

Almost all teachers – 97% – report seeing SEND students' confidence grow when pupils have reliable digital tools. Two thirds say that students with dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD perform better academically when they can depend on those tools working every time.

As a result, there's more classroom participation, better homework completion and less anxiety around academic tasks. These are the outcomes inclusive education is designed to achieve. Reliability, it turns out, is what unlocks them.

When asked what they prioritise when choosing devices for SEND students, 63% of teachers put consistent, reliable performance first. Pre-installed accessibility software and ease of repair both came in at 42%, while only 13% prioritised lowest cost. These aren't the priorities of people indifferent to budgets, but the priorities of professionals who have learned from experience what actually makes a difference.

The procurement question schools avoid

There's an uncomfortable implication here for any school that selects devices based primarily on upfront cost. A device that fails regularly may appear affordable at purchase, but those hidden costs – in terms of teacher time, anxiety, lost learning and the slow erosion of a SEND student's willingness to try – may outweigh any savings. Schools are, in effect, buying a problem and paying for it in a currency that doesn't show up on a balance sheet. It's no coincidence that ASUS commissioned this research. Its devices are engineered around precisely the priorities teachers in this survey identified.

Rugged, durable construction that handles the everyday realities of school life. Scratch-resistant, spill-resistant, tamper-resistant designs built for shared classroom use. All-day battery life that doesn't require charging between lessons. Fast boot-up and consistent performance to ensure that devices are ready when students are. Built-in security, pre-installed accessibility software and modular components that make repair straightforward, rather than a procurement headache. Reliability, in other words, treated as a design principle, rather than an afterthought.

When choosing technology for SEND provision, the question to ask isn't '*What does it cost?*' It's '*Will it work every time a SEND student needs it?*'

If the answer is uncertain, then that uncertainty will carry a price – one ultimately paid for by those students who can least afford it.

DOWNLOAD THE FULL REPORT

The 'Building Confidence, Enabling Success – How device reliability shapes SEND student outcomes in secondary schools' report is available to download free of charge.

Scan the QR code below to access the full report, including all survey data, findings by SEND condition and practical guidance for school procurement decisions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
John Lawson is a former secondary teacher, now serving as a foundation governor while running a tutoring service, and author of the book **The Successful (Less Stressful) Student** (Outskirts Press, £11.95); find out more at **prep4successnow.wordpress.com** or follow **@johninpompano**

THE LAST WORD

System error

John Lawson recalls one 'high-tech revolution' in education that proved to be a cautionary tale...

The news that Sweden is rolling back the digitalization of its education programmes has been welcomed by many educators worldwide – particularly those in Denmark, New Zealand and France, who have pledged to follow suit.

Back in 2012, my former school in Florida exhorted the faculty to embrace what was billed as a 'high-tech revolution' – whereupon I was quickly tagged as a Jeremiah for showing insufficient enthusiasm...

Valid objections

Now, I'm no anti-tech Luddite. In the early 2000s I was regularly helping students create award-winning video projects, and when YouTube was launched in 2005, I quickly saw its potential as a daily motivational tool.

I believe that when used *sensibly*, technology can transform education in remarkable ways. I also believe it's wise to carefully evaluate the valid objections many have raised over students' incessant use of laptops.

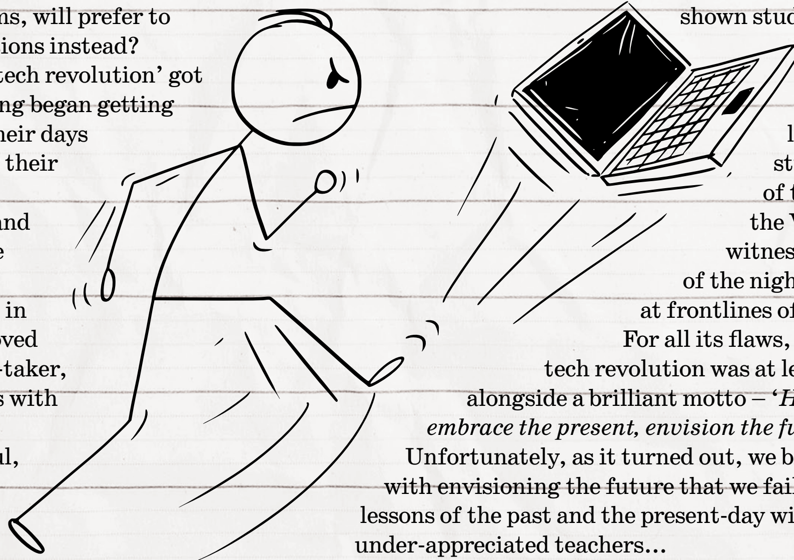
Consider the economics. To cover our 2,200 students, we employed five (costly) non-teaching technicians. The overall cost of our tech scheme launch year exceeded $1m, and even now, my former school's technology use continues to exceed $750,000 annually – a figure likely to climb even higher, given ongoing energy price rises. At that point, we have to start asking whether it might be far cheaper adopt pen-and-paper learning instead...

'Alternative curricula'

Few teachers can compete with the instant gratification offered by the internet. How many teenagers, when confronted with complex problems, will prefer to explore more entertaining diversions instead?

Thus, soon after our school's 'tech revolution' got under way, many hours of teaching began getting lost as students opted to spend their days devising alternative curricula on their newly issued laptops. Sports highlights, social media, games and muscle car videos all proved to be popular distractions.

Students stopped taking notes in lessons. Instead, most classes moved to nominating a designated note-taker, who would then share their notes with everyone else in an instant. This meant everyone received plentiful, yet identical – and, in all likelihood, unread – notes after the lesson's conclusion.



Those parts of the lesson considered most important was left to the discernment of just one scribe. The students, freed up from having to take notes of their own, happily fell into yet more distractions.

Authority undermined

Some students became emboldened to challenge everything we teachers tried to tell them. I'd state, "*It's estimated that around 1 million Rwandans were slaughtered in the 1994 genocide*", only to be then interrupted by a student insisting that, "*Siri says that only 800,000 died.*" '*Only*' 800,000...

And from where did some accountability finally emerge? Data. Our PSAT and SAT scores immediately plummeted soon after the laptops appeared in class, as did the number of our students going on to become National Merit Scholars. Statistically, we saw this Gen Z cohort become the first to not outperform their parents academically.

It's little wonder that the tech titans of Silicon Valley choose to enrol their children in schools where student-facing technology is relatively rare. After all, the children reading books and writing compositions in those schools can't swipe for alternatives.

The importance of agency

The experience taught me that teachers need to retain and preserve their agency as much as possible – so how about equipping *them* with the innovative tech tools that so dazzle our students?

I've seen brilliant lessons in tech labs that have identified different planets and stars, and shown students how complex human organs function. I've watched an RE lesson that took students on a 3D tour of the Holy Land and the Vatican. We can now witness a soldier's eye view of the nightmarish conditions at frontlines of WWI.

For all its flaws, our school's ill-fated tech revolution was at least launched alongside a brilliant motto – '*Honour the past, embrace the present, envision the future*'.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, we became so enamoured with envisioning the future that we failed to honour the lessons of the past and the present-day wisdom of our under-appreciated teachers...

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