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INTERVIEW

FARA WILLIAMS

"No one at school knew I played for England"

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Recruitment tips for shortage subjects

"HE WOULDN'T DO THAT!"

The art of calming angry parents

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FROM THE EDITOR

"Welcome...

Can we describe *Adolescence* as 'era-defining' television yet? From the vantage point of May 2025 it certainly feels as though we can, what with its name-checking in dozens of newspaper op-eds and Keir Starmer's demands for it to be shown in schools across the country (details on page 9).

In these restless, febrile times, we may well have put it out of our minds completely come December – but for now, at least, it seems to have succeeded in doing what the likes of *Cathy Come Home* and *Boys From The Blackstuff* did aeons ago, and what *Mr Bates vs The Post Office* managed last year – thrust an urgent, contemporary issue centre stage so that mainstream audiences start talking about it, to the extent that our most senior decision-makers feel compelled to pay attention.

Notwithstanding the evident craft with which *Adolescence* was put together, its subject matter – knife crime, the malign effects of smartphones on teenage brains and above all, incel culture – will have surely piqued the interest of almost every secondary school teacher and leader out there.

The concerns and challenges the series explores are ones that educators are wearily familiar with, but crucially, *not parents*. Amid the discourse surrounding *Adolescence*, one heartbreaking quote from its dialogue has emerged that pretty much encapsulates everything co-writers Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham seem to feel about the implications of granting teens unsupervised access to the unregulated internet: "*We thought he was safe.*"

For a number of years, I've been of the view that the days of allowing a relaxed, light-touch approach to monitoring juvenile access to Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp and all the rest are surely numbered, and that a reckoning is due. It still seems unclear whether the imminent passage of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will bring that about – but either way, society at large needs to take a long, hard look at what a completely unregulated media landscape has done to children's and teenagers' brains.

Many teachers through the years will have overheard kids excitedly discussing adult-oriented films and games they should have no business engaging with, that's true – but that 'problematic content' was never produced with such a young audience in mind. What's changed, is that those poisonous, YouTube-hosted dispatches from the manosphere and elsewhere *very much are*.

Once upon a time, a teen's post-school media habits might have included a non-networked games console, possibly alongside an episode of *Grange Hill*, *Neighbours* and/or *Hollyoaks*. We can now measure in decades the period in which teens have been absorbing messaging at home crafted specifically for them, by bad actors, that actively and deliberately opposes the lessons they're learning in school. But for how much longer?

Enjoy the issue,

Callum Fauser
callum.fauser@theteachco.com

On board this issue:

Jennifer Hampton is an English teacher and literacy lead

Anthony David is an executive headteacher

Ann Marie Christian is a safeguarding and child protection expert

Ed Carlin is a deputy headteacher

Meena Wood is a former principal and HMI

Lewis Wedlock is an educator, social psychologist and mental health professional

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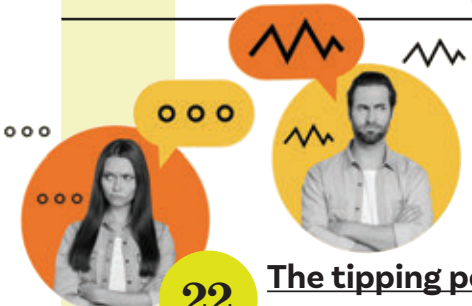

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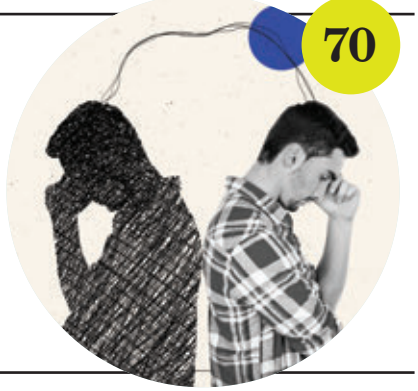

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Publishers: Joe Carter, Sam Reubin, Richard Stebbing

Editor: Callum Fauser, callum.fauser@artichokehq.com, 01206 505115

Group Advertising Managers: Samantha Law, samantha.law@artichokehq.com, 01206 505499

Hayley Rackham, hayley.rackham@artichokehq.com, 01206 505928

Deputy Advertising Manager: Hannah Jones, hannah.jones@artichokehq.com, 01206 505924

Art editors: Richard Allen, Sarah Barajas

Customer services: secondary@artichokehq.com

Accounts: artichokemedialtd@integral2.com

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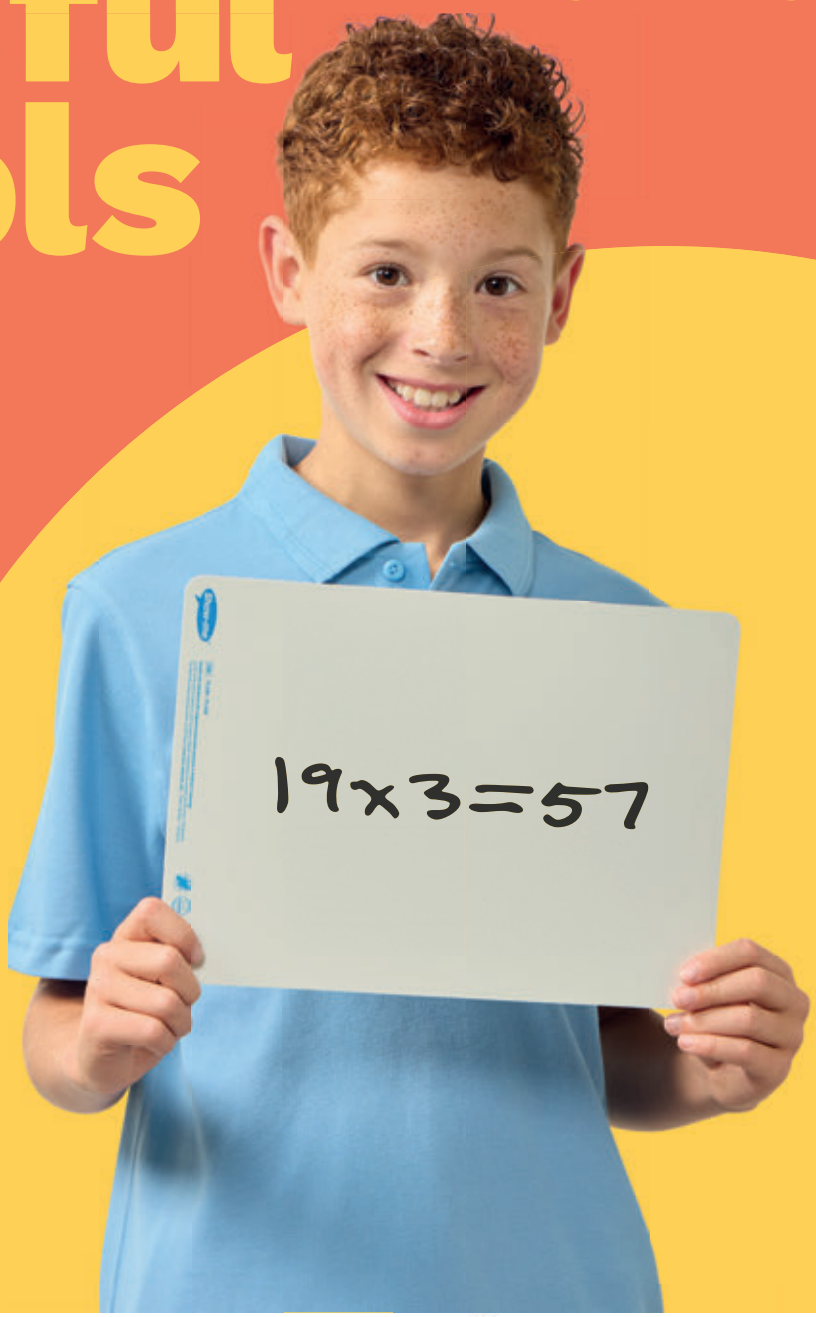

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The newsletter

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

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

CHICKEN JOCKEY

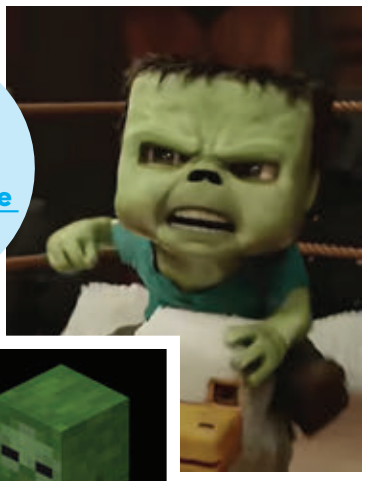
Given the mayfly-like lifecycle of your typical internet meme in 2025, 'chicken jockey' may be well and truly dead by the time you read this. Still, for any teachers and online palaeontologists who overheard their students mention it several weeks ago, some background.

Waaaay back in 2011, a video game was released that essentially combined computerised Lego with resource management and survival mechanics. It was called *Minecraft*, and you've probably heard of it. A bug in early versions of the game would see players occasionally encounter an enemy zombie that had accidentally spawned (i.e. been placed by the game) atop a wandering chicken. Occasional sightings of this 'chicken jockey' swiftly became part of the folklore surrounding the game.

Then, in April this year, a PG-rated cinematic adaptation of the game – called, imaginatively enough, *A Minecraft Movie* – was released in cinemas across the world. A scene in the film shows a 'chicken jockey' manifesting in a boxing ring – which, for reasons unknown, has become a cue for the film's young audiences to engage in flashmob-style misbehaviour during cinema screenings – from loud shouting and the throwing of food at one end of the scale, to the alleged unveiling of a previously concealed actual chicken at the other.

And yes, it's all very silly, but at least kids are still experiencing the magic of cinema, right? Well, there's a small army of ushers with thousand-yard stares out there who might take issue with that assessment...

DO SAY
"As a child, I yearned for the mines"



DON'T SAY
"EVERYTHING IS AWESOME!"

BEAT THE BUDGET

What are we talking about?
Hyundai's 'Great British School Trip' programme

Who is it for?
KS2/KS3 students

What's on offer?
Bursaries to assist with organising school trips, alongside a series of free trip resources – including a virtual space lesson led by Dame Dr Maggie Aderin (pictured), and a card game for school and home use called 'Future Jobs Trumps' designed to help students understand their potential career options.

Where is it available?
greatbritishschooltrip.com

Think of a number...

51%

of secondary school senior leaders report making cuts to teaching staff numbers within the past year

Source: Survey of 1,208 teachers by the National Foundation for Educational Research

£8.2m
has been invested by the DfE into advanced maths teaching in schools, aimed at boosting the subject's participation rates among girls

Source: DfE

388
The average number of children that Elective Home Education Officers based at LAs are responsible for

Source: NSPCC

WHAT THEY SAID...

"He's a poundshop Donald Trump"

– NEU general secretary, Daniel Kebede, referring to Nigel Farage

ONE FOR THE WALL

"It's the wanting to know that makes us matter"

***Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard**

Just the job?

The government's pledge last year to recruit an extra 6,500 teachers in state schools and FE colleges by the end of the current Parliament may not be enough, due to changing demographics and ongoing financial challenges.

That's the view of the National Audit Office, which recently issued a new report, examining whether government measures aimed at addressing the education recruitment crisis are delivering sufficient value for money. The report notes how £700 million was allocated to a range of teacher recruitment initiatives in 2024, set against data indicating that there are still 4,000 existing state secondary and FE collage teacher vacancies.

The report goes on to highlight how teacher numbers are failing to meet a forecasted rise in the number of secondary school pupils, which is expected to peak in 2028. Indeed, the DfE currently estimates that a further 8,400 to 12,400 will be needed by 2028/29.

Another concerning finding is that the proportion of those leaving the profession due to retirement is down (7% in 2022/23 versus 33% in 2010/11), suggesting that a sizeable proportion of teaching staff are opting for work in other sectors.

The NAO recommendations to government include publishing a delivery plan for achieving the aforementioned '6,500 teacher' pledge; encouraging those in teacher training to enter teaching jobs at state-funded settings; and building an evidence base of recruitment and retention strategies.

The full report can be downloaded via tiny.cc/ts144-NL1

SAVE THE DATE

SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

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

THE SPEECH:

Education Secretary addresses Children's Commissioner's Festival of Childhood

WHO? Bridget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education
WHERE? Festival of Childhood, taking place at London's Young V&A
WHEN? 3rd April 2025

"Putting children first isn't soft. It's not a sugar-rush, ice-cream-for-dinner approach to schooling. It requires exposing children to a wide range of ideas, so that they can find what inspires them.

It requires supporting children to persist with subjects that might feel hard, when they don't immediately like what is in front of them; to keep going when it's hard not to give up at the first sign of struggle. So that they can discover for themselves the quiet satisfaction, the happy resilience that comes from the pursuit of learning.

It's how we raise a generation of children who can think critically and act thoughtfully, and that matters more now than ever before. At a time when uncertainty is rising, and trust is falling; a time when disinformation can slip quietly into the pockets of our children, and young boys can fall under the spell of toxic role models online – men who preach misogyny, who cook up resentment, who feed on hatred.

It's clear the behaviour of boys, their influences, and the young men they become, is a defining issue of our time. We need to raise a generation of boys with the strength to reject that hatred – curiosity, compassion, kindness, resilience, hope, and respect."

THE RESPONSE:

ASCL responds to 'workforce quality gap'

FROM? Pepe Di'Iasio, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders
REGARDING? The EPI's 'Closing the Workforce Quality Gap' report
WHEN? 29th April 2025

"This report lays bare one of the starkest issues in our education system – that children and young people who would most benefit from being taught by our strongest teachers and leaders are the least likely to experience this.

Our accountability system has actively penalised those working in more deprived areas, making it more difficult to recruit teachers and leaders in disadvantaged areas, who understandably feel the odds are stacked against them. In turn, this means disadvantaged children are more likely to be taught by teachers who are less experienced, or non-specialists, or in larger classes."

26 JUNE 2025 The Northern Education Show | 3-4 JULY 2025 Festival of Education | 18-19 OCTOBER 2025 Battle of Ideas Festival

26 JUNE 2025

The Northern Education Show
Bolton Stadium Hotel
northerneducationshow.uk

Free to attend for school leaders, administrative staff and local government representatives, The Northern Education Show will give key education decision-makers the chance to meet directly with educational suppliers, and hear first-hand from government officials about the latest policy trends and developments set to shape the profession.

3-4 JULY 2025

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

This annual gathering of educators will once again be hosting a series of discussions and engaging speakers across some 40 on-site locations. As the name suggests, this really is a 'festival', giving visitors ample opportunities to share their ideas, experiences and practice with like-minded – and very differently inclined – teachers from across the country within relaxed indoor and outdoor surroundings.

18-19 OCTOBER 2025

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

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

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TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

In the dark

After a refit, the light switches for our new sports hall were relocated to the corridor outside. One day, a teacher wanting to use the hall came to the PE office, asking how to turn the lights on. Always 'game for a laugh', I told him the lights were now voice-activated, and offered to give him a demonstration. A fellow PE colleague in the office realised what I was up to, and followed us to the darkened sports hall.

I entered with the teacher, and shouted towards the top left corner, "*Lights on!*". As I did so, my colleague in the corridor duly threw the light switch, and the teacher was amazed. I told him he'd better see if it recognised his voice too, so he attempted a series of 'successful' verbal on and offs and was very impressed by the 'technology'. We then left him to it.

Some days later, the PE office voicemail captured an irate, expletive-laced voice message from the teacher, informing us that he'd spent five minutes in a gloomy sports hall unsuccessfully shouting for the lights to come on, before eventually being shown where the physical switches were by the school caretaker...

Good proofredding

From a teacher's subject report: "[the student] is making very god progress in Religious Studies"

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

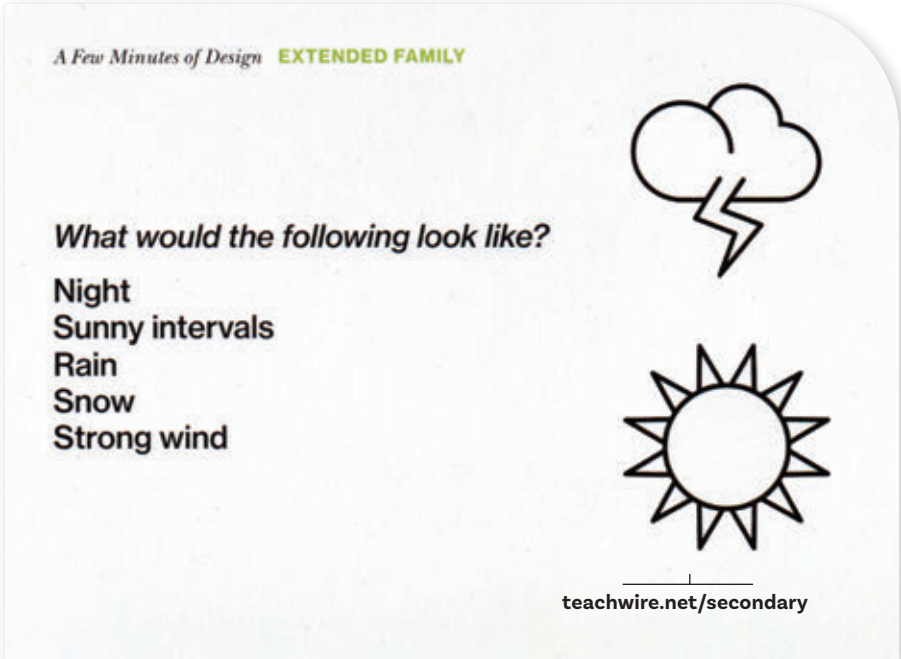
A FEW MINUTES OF DESIGN

#36 EXTENDED FAMILY

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

Draw your own symbols to continue the series, keeping the same visual 'language' of simplification, line, shape and style as the original members.

Now draw a symbol that doesn't belong to the family.



Get Into Film

ADOLESCENCE (2025, 15, 4 EPISODES, 228 MINS TOTAL)

CURRICULUM LINKS:
PSHE

Into Film has partnered with Netflix to make viewings of the acclaimed drama mini-series *Adolescence* free to all schools via the Into Film+ streaming service. Co-written by Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham, the story centres on the arrest of a 13-year-old boy (played by Owen Cooper, in his TV acting debut) for the murder of a female student attending the same school.

All four episodes are available to view in their entirety, with the option for teachers to save and view specific scenes when discussing key topics and themes in class. Schools can also download a guide for teachers containing advice on how to present the drama in age-appropriate way to their students.

According to Into Film CEO, Fiona Evans, "*We are sure that schools will choose to use this incredible drama in a variety of ways that will encourage teachers, students and parents to continue the important conversations that the drama has already prompted in homes across the UK.*"

For further details on how to access the Into Film+ service, and to download the accompanying guide for teachers, visit intofilm.org/adolescence

Like and subscribe

Who's been saying what on the socials of late?

Laura McInerney @missmc.bsky.social
A 15-year-old once suggested to me you should do exams twice - once in an exam hall, and then get an additional paper to do however you wish, which would show their skills in the real world (including ability to seek help from others). There's obvious issues, but there's something compelling in it.

mjfrombuffalo @mjfrombuffalo.bsky.social
I can totally see a world where teachers use AI to create assignments, students use AI to complete assignments, teachers use AI to grade assignments, and no one learned a damned thing.

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David Voisin is a head of MFL

DICTIONARY DEEP DIVE

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

PARDON MY FRENCH

Someone being shot at 'point blank' range is the sort of scenario you'd encounter if you're an avid reader of the 'Norwegian Noir' thriller genre. The word '*noir*', being French for black, here refers to the sombre atmosphere commonly found in detective stories. The term 'point blank' actually comes from '*point blanc*' ('white dot'), describing the bullseye of archery targets back when bows were a standard military weapon – because only when they were at close range would archers align their arrows directly with the centre of the target.

TEACHING TIP: LESS WRITING, MORE THINKING

Many will have heard the saying "*I have not had the time to write less*" loosely attributed to either Blaise Pascal or Mark Twain – but what about taking *less* time to write *more*? If writing is indeed the residue of thought, then perhaps spending more time reflecting on the content will increase a writer's productivity in terms of both quality and quantity.

I once carried out an experiment with two pupil groups, both tasked with producing a 300-word essay in a foreign language. The first group were allowed to organise their writing freely over two lessons. The second were instructed to spend a whole lesson revisiting their notes and drafting a detailed plan, complete with paragraph headings, sub sections and annotations regarding technical elements (such as idiomatic expressions) that could be later injected into the prose.

The first group produced mostly disjointed writing that often lacked clarity. The second group effortlessly met or exceeded the word count with articulate and meaningful pieces of writing.

A key didactic element of the process was for everyone to utilise their exercise books judiciously – thus shifting the students' perceptions of their books as mere 'content recorders' to seeing them instead as working tools, and effectively an extension of their brains.

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Any teacher reading this will have likely come across multiple spelling mistakes in just the last week alone. Among the most tenacious is the spelling of the possessive 'its'. The irony, as I'm sure some readers are already thinking, is that teachers share some of the blame – though whether their culpability is down to intellectual fatigue, typos or grammatical lacunas is up for debate. In his book *Accidence Will Happen* (sic), Oliver Kamm mounts a crusade against pedantry, explaining that *grammar* is about syntax, morphology and phonology, with *spelling* being an entirely separate element.

Is 'its' really just a matter of spelling, though? When we look at non-natives who have learnt English grammatically, we see that relatively few among this group regularly confuse 'its' with 'it's'. English is a 'morphologically light' language, which can serve to obfuscate what are actually close relationships between spelling and grammar.

People such as me, who learnt English grammatically, rather than phonetically, will circumnavigate the spelling of homophones by replacing the relevant words with non-homophones of the same grammatical nature. Instinct may lead us to believe that 'its' is equivalent to 'hers' or 'theirs' – when it is, in fact, grammatically the same as 'her' or 'their'. Compare, for instance, the structurally similar 'The dog and its owner' with 'The girl and her pet'.

When you substitute 'its' (possessive) with the longer version of it's (it is), you immediately realise that one of those options isn't grammatically coherent while the other is.

SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS

The US **Pent**agon takes its name from the geometrical shape with five sides

The modern **Pent**athlon is an Olympic sport consisting of five disciplines

In Judaism, the **Pent**ateuch comprises the first five chapters of the Old Testament

An invisible AUTHORITY

Alka Sehgal Cuthbert explains why exam boards are the hidden arbiters of what knowledge gets taught in schools...

Despite regular media controversies around GCSE exam results, and indeed the exams themselves, those tasked with the writing of questions for national examination papers – the exam boards – tend to conduct their work with relatively little in the way of public scrutiny.

As such, there have been some fundamental changes in how exam boards are organised and their educational priorities, which have gone largely unremarked upon by the wider profession.

Scholarly affairs

The national examinations system for 16-year-olds was a product of Britain's post-war education system, initially comprising O Levels (taken by the 'academic' top 20% of pupils) and CSEs (taken by the rest).

Most private schools used assessments produced by exam boards associated with either Oxford or Cambridge Universities. The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) specialised in exams for grammar school pupils intending to go on to study at university. These were scholarly affairs, derived from the fairly direct relationships schools tended to have with subject departments at both universities.

Those exam boards catering to the majority of pupils taking CSEs were organised according to administrative regions. These typically consisted of a Board made up of a Governing Council and an Examinations Committee, whose members came from various walks of life – including academics and serving teachers (the latter often being largest group).

Institutional stability

The content and framing of the O Level syllabus and exams may have differed from the CSE equivalent, but there was some overlap. Both included the study of canonical books, for example – albeit with the former focusing mainly on older classics, while the latter also included some modern literary texts. The 1979 CSE English exam set by the East Midland Regional Exam Board (EMREB), for instance, featured recommended texts by Muriel Spark, DH Lawrence and Carson McCullers.

Another distinction was that the O Level syllabus was examined by external exams formed of essay questions, while the CSE had three modes of assessment. The CSE system was moreover supported by Subject Panels, which would meet regularly to disseminate policy, discuss educational matters and annually review/revise syllabuses. Any proposed changes would require two years' notice for approval by the Board.

Whatever one's views of Britain's traditional examination system, over time it at least evinced a high level of professional trust and autonomy among teachers, plus a degree of institutional stability that seems enviable today.

From compromise to consolidation

Two events stand out for their profound – if unintended – destabilising effects on exam boards. The reasons why are multiple and complex, but the first was the introduction of the unitary GCSE examination in 1986. The second was the Education Reform Act (ERA) in 1988.

> **"Britain's traditional examination system at least evinced a high level of professional trust and autonomy among teachers"**

Moves to replace GCE O Levels and CSE exams with a unitary exam had long been supported by Labour Party members, who saw the existing exams system as the educational expression of a society starkly divided along class lines.

Maintaining an entirely separate course and exam taken by only the top 20% of pupils was seen by some as reneging on the promise of a universal education system – namely, a broad and balanced curriculum for all. For Conservatives, the dual exams system was a compromise necessitated by a commitment to the principles of meritocracy.

ERA introduced, among other things, a new government-appointed inspection body called Ofsted, which soon came to dominate the important processes of both grading and inspecting schools.

Overlooked at the time, amid the furore regarding the content of the National Curriculum, were plans to merge some established exam boards, so that a new GCSE exam to be sat by all pupils could be produced. So it was that EMREB merged with the West Midland Examination Board to form the Midland Examining Group (MEG), which was latterly incorporated into the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate – which itself later merged with the awarding body known today as OCR (its name deriving from Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts).

External pressures

In 1995, the Midland Examining Group had to produce over 80 GCSE syllabuses that could be deemed ready for publication within a year. Recall that previously, any changes to CSE exams required *two years' notice*, and you get a sense of the degree to which the traditional examinations ecosystem and its various relationships had been disrupted.

What was lost in this process of reorganisation was the *authority of scholarship* previously found in those relationships between university scholars, regional education boards and local schools. As their intellectual and ethical authority weakened, exam boards

became increasingly exposed to the economic and political pressures of the outside world. See, for example, the 1994 MEG GCSE syllabus for English, which states:

'*The syllabus has been designed to offer to all candidates equal opportunities to demonstrate their attainment, whatever the Level, regardless of each candidate's gender, religion, and ethnic and social background.*"

Here, we see the vocabulary of equal opportunities and multiculturalism enter the domain of school knowledge, as embodied by exam boards. It would be strange to think that the intellectual substance of examinations would be unaffected by such changes – yet this was the position of the Qualification and Curriculum Authority in 2004, after carrying out an evaluation of examinations from 1980 to 2000, from which it concluded that accessibility had improved, while the demands made had remained unchanged.

Instructional language

However, just four years later, when reviewing forms of assessment between 1887 and 2007, Cambridge Assessment wrote of English examination papers: "*Earlier question papers required a much closer knowledge and memory of the prescribed text... Later question papers gave more emphasis to a different set of skills, perhaps emphasising more progressive ideals of pupils' capacity to* ***experience*** *literature, and not just to* ***know*** *about it.*" (my emphasis)

We can see this shift by comparing typical English literature exam questions at different times:

"*Choose two episodes in this play which you find most amusing. Describe them briefly and show how in each episode Shaw obtains his humorous effect.*"
– 1957 UCLES O Level English literature paper

[Foundation] "*What vivid impressions of George and Lennie's relationship does this passage give you?*"

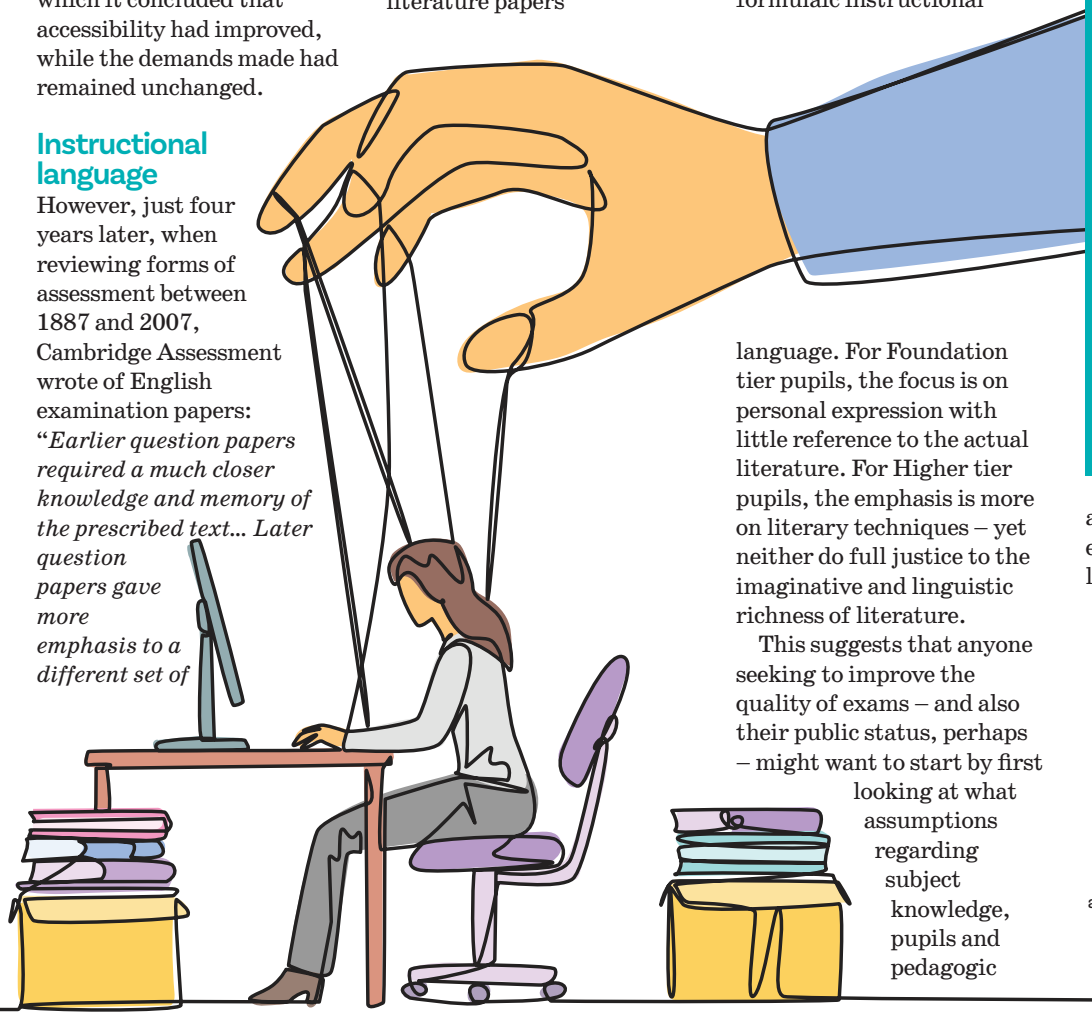
[Higher] "*How does Steinbeck's writing here vividly convey the relationship between George and Lennie?*"
– 2011 OCR English literature papers

The 1957 question assumes an intimate knowledge of the whole play, allowing for some personal response, while also demanding knowledge of literary techniques. The instructional verbs throughout the paper are varied. In this question alone, we can see there are three – 'choose', 'describe' and 'show'.

By contrast, the 2011 questions are more or less repeated throughout the whole paper – variations of '*Describe your personal, vivid impressions of an extract*', or '*Identify these literary techniques*'. All papers and questions in the 2011 exam were based on extracts which, in theory, could see pupils pass without them having read the entirety of the source text they're supposedly meant to have studied.

More significantly, perhaps, is the 2011 papers' formulaic instructional language. For Foundation tier pupils, the focus is on personal expression with little reference to the actual literature. For Higher tier pupils, the emphasis is more on literary techniques – yet neither do full justice to the imaginative and linguistic richness of literature.

This suggests that anyone seeking to improve the quality of exams – and also their public status, perhaps – might want to start by first looking at what assumptions regarding subject knowledge, pupils and pedagogic approaches are being embedded in today's English literature exams.



IN BRIEF

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?
A comparison of older O Level and modern day GCSE English literature papers shows how the cognitive complexity involved in sitting the subject's exams has reduced over time.

WHAT'S BEING SAID?
Academic researchers have shown how the English literature exam now seems to prioritise consideration of a text's literary qualities and students' experiential reflections, over deep knowledge of the text itself and analysis of literary techniques.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING?
Sweeping changes to how exams were administered, following the introduction of GCSEs in 1986, have ultimately resulted in exam questions becoming less robust and rigorous as time has gone on.

THE TAKEAWAY
We should carefully examine how the evolving composition and priorities of exam boards may have served to alter the content and academic value of the GCSE exam papers – and consider whether it may now be time to re-adopt a more scholarly approach to syllabus development and revision.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Alka Sehgal Cuthbert is a teacher, independent academic and writer, and co-editor of *What Should Schools Teach? – Disciplines, subjects and the pursuit of truth, 2nd Ed.* (£25, UCL Press)

Q&A

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30 SECOND BRIEFING

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ABOUT PAUL: Paul Jones is Strategic Partnerships Manager at OCR

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Adolescence has got people talking about the harms of the online manosphere – but the issues it shines a light on have been with us for a long while, and there still seems to be some reluctance to do something about the root of the problem...

Natasha Devon

Since its release, the Netflix drama *Adolescence* has been watched by 66.3 million people and counting, including the Prime Minister. In much of the coverage surrounding it, the show has been described as 'shocking' – and whilst it's never easy to be confronted with the extreme consequences of online radicalisation, I doubt that anyone regularly working with young people will have been especially shocked at the show's themes.

Nor, indeed, anyone paying attention to discussions of online radicalisation and misogyny around two years ago, when female teachers were speaking to media outlets about male pupils telling them to '*Make me a sandwich*', experiences of physical intimidation and feelings of being unsafe at work because of the so-called 'Tate Effect'.

A weird mood

I first became awake to all this in 2014, when I was giving a talk on body image at a co-ed private school. The mood felt weird, but I couldn't work out why, since all the pupils appeared to be listening respectfully. Then, about 10 minutes in, two of the boys stood up in unison, did a weird salute, turned on their heels and marched out of the room.

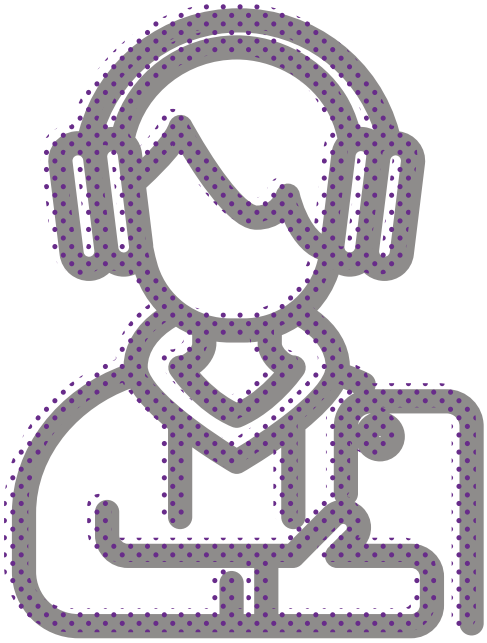
The atmosphere immediately changed in their absence, and I realised that the hostility I'd felt radiating from the audience had been coming from them. I later discovered that they were big fans of Milo Yiannopoulos – described by Google's AI overview as '*A far-right political commentator whose content is highly critical of Islam, feminism and social justice.*'

He was also a key figure behind 'Gamergate', which was a misogynistic online harassment campaign motivated by a backlash against diversity in video games. These two pupils had messaged Yiannopoulos on Twitter, telling him that I – a reasonably high profile feminist and campaigner for equalities – was giving a talk at their school, and asking him what they should do. '*Boycott,*' he replied.

After that, I realised that there were a handful of boys in most of the schools I visited who were devotees of Yiannapoulos' content. I made it my mission to learn more about this stuff, speaking to experts in online radicalisation from the Centre for Countering Digital Hate. I read *Crash, Override* by Zoe Quinn – a video game content creator whose life was almost destroyed by Gamergate – as well as *Men Who Hate Woman*, which documented an investigation into the so-called 'Manosphere' by feminist campaigner Laura Bates.

Online echo chambers

I came to believe that part of Yiannopoulos' motivation had simply been attention – so when Andrew Tate first made his presence known in the schools I visited, I didn't mention him by name. Especially since, around this time, there was a trend for pupils asking their teachers what they thought of him, covertly recording their responses and uploading them to TikTok, tagging Tate in the process (who apparently loved that he was being discussed).



I did, however, begin dedicating a section of my talks on social media and mental health to online radicalisation, explaining how algorithms rewarded producers of the most shocking and outrageous content, since that's what grabbed viewers' attention. And how, if we consume enough of such content, we'll soon find ourselves in an online echo chamber.

All this happened before Elon Musk, and later Mark Zuckerberg (who own five of the 10 most used social media platforms between them) announced they would be dispensing with fact-checking and loosening their platforms' rules around online hate speech. Soon after, the accounts of previously-banned hatemongers were duly reinstated.

Right now, if you're a teenage boy on social media, approximately 25% of the content in your feed is likely to be misogynistic in nature, simply because of your age and gender. If you engage with that content, that proportion will then increase to 75%.

Against this backdrop, it's therefore frustrating to hear both Keir Starmer state that *Adolescence* should be shown in all schools, and Gareth Southgate's calls for male role models. The first suggestion won't achieve anything (the programme isn't for teenagers, it's an introduction for adults), while the second is an important issue, but one we've been discussing for decades.

If we really want to solve this problem, the government must find a way of reigning in the tech oligarchs whose platforms are poisoning children's minds.

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

It looks like we shouldn't expect much in the way of radical change from Labour's curriculum and assessment reforms – so what's stopping them from going further?

Melissa Benn

It's not unduly cynical to observe that governments often set up major reviews of policy with a pretty clear idea of the outcome they'd like to see.

Sometimes – as with the current Casey review into social care, which won't report until 2028 – there's justified suspicion that the government wants to kick an intractable (and expensive) issue into the long grass.

Moderate reforms

The ongoing Curriculum and Assessment review, however, has a much tighter timetable. Led by Professor Becky Francis, chief executive of the respected Education Endowment Foundation, it seems likely to propose a number of changes the Labour government has already indicated it would welcome.

Sure enough, the interim report published by Professor Francis and her team in March this year (see tiny.cc/ts144-MB1) hinted at some moderate reforms to an overstuffed curriculum that currently squeezes out the arts and effective vocational pathways. Clearly, she's treading carefully, insisting that she's largely interested in "*Evolution, not revolution.*"

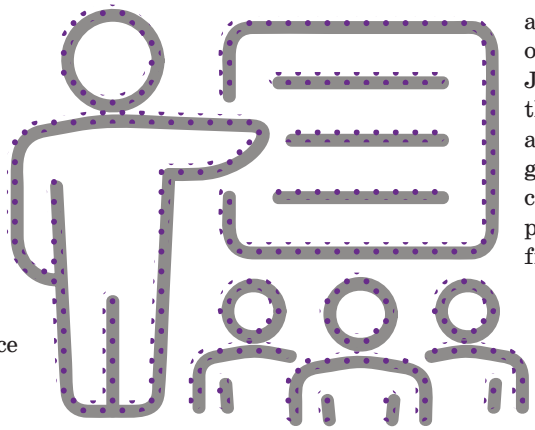
And yet, the Review's proposals are already being treated as highly controversial. In a recent *New Statesman* interview (see tiny.cc/ts144-MB2), Michaela Community School headteacher Katherine Birbalsingh lambasted both Professor Francis and Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, declaring that, "*They're going to destroy our schools*". Shadow Education Secretary Laura Trott, meanwhile, has described the interim report's proposals as a 'wrecking ball' (see tiny.cc/ts144-MB3).

Such extreme reactions illustrate once again the continuing influence of a certain cohort of education leaders enabled and promoted by the Conservatives' remaking of the educational landscape between 2010 and 2024. Sadly, their protests serve to drown out a necessary – and much more interesting – series of conversations regarding the best, and potentially deeper purposes of a contemporary curriculum.

An 'aims-based' curriculum

In a presentation to the House of Commons last autumn, Brian Matthews of Kings College stressed the importance of a curriculum that could help pupils engage with democracy, arguing that its removal from the existing curriculum had resulted in "*A lack of critical awareness, alienation from education, individualism, and little acceptance of diversity and varied gender roles," and concluding that "This has helped promote right-wing values.*"

Professor John White, a distinguished philosopher of education, has also written extensively on the importance of an 'aims-based curriculum', highlighting the innovative work done towards the end of New Labour's time in power – particularly the activities of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, before it was swept away in 2010 (see tiny.cc/ts144-MB4).



Between 2007 and 2010, the English school curriculum sought to ensure that children could become successful learners capable of leading safe, healthy and fulfilling lives, and eventually responsible citizens willing and able to contribute to wider society.

As White points out, none of these aims exclude the study of specific subjects, be it maths, science or whatever else – but they *do* enable more interdisciplinary learning (climate change being one example) and allow more space for aesthetic appreciation.

Extracurricular exclusion

White's proposals echo the work of those other notable education luminaries, Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters. In their 2022 book, *About Our Schools*, both argued for a fundamental redrawing of "*The entire learning experience that we (should) plan for our children during their school years*".

Brighouse and Waters were keenly aware of the thousands of children regularly excluded – mainly by poverty – from the kind of extracurricular experiences that are typically the birthright of their middle class peers. Many have become disengaged from school completely, thanks to the highly academic post-2014 curriculum and exams system.

Professor Francis will, of course, be aware of these arguments and their origins in mainstream Labour thinking. John White has since talked of his hope that her commitment to 'evolution' amounts to an implicit promise from the government and its allies to revisit the curriculum further down the line and perhaps imbue it with some new and fresh principles.

At least for now, it seems that both Professor Francis and the government are acutely conscious of the Govian education establishment's hostility to risk edging into bolder territory.

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

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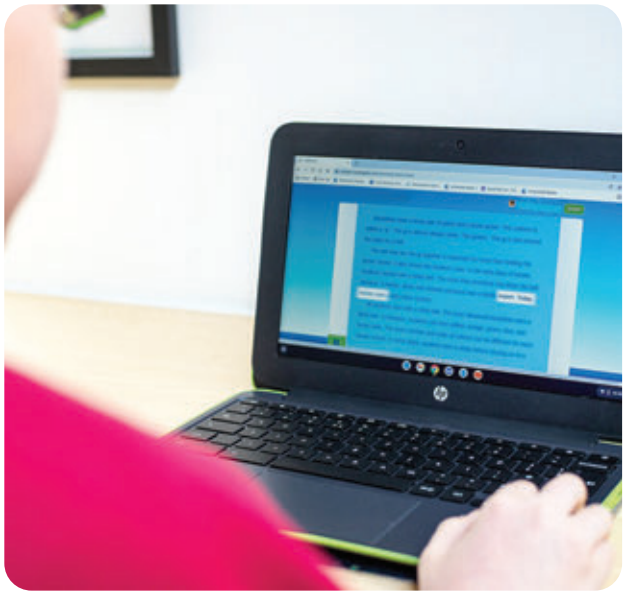

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30 SECOND BRIEFING

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

Company Timeline

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

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

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

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

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TEA AD 0089 04/25

WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

Fara Williams MBE, The Lionesses' most capped player, explains why none of her teachers or classmates had any idea that she was playing football for England during her teens – and why she has come to be E.ON's New Energy Academy's Trailblazer Ambassador...

Which schools did you attend and what were they like?
My primary school was a minute's walk from home, in the estate where I lived, and I loved it. We had a good headmaster who identified my talent for football really early on.

Because we lived so nearby, me and my little brother usually arrived well before school opened. One day, our headmaster drew a box on one of the walls in the playground and some lines on the floor, and told me I should practice kicking with my weaker foot.

How did you find the move to secondary school?
I went to two secondary schools. I struggled a bit with meeting new people at the first one, as no one from my primary school went with me and I was quite a shy kid. There wasn't much opportunity for me to play football at that school, so I wasn't all that sporty, either.

But then, in Y9, I moved to a different senior school that was *really* into the sports side of what they did. A lot of the people I lived with on the estate went there too, so settling in was much easier.

Some of the education I'd had at the previous school, and how they taught it, was very different though, so making that transition was still quite difficult.

Outside of PE, what were the other subjects that interested you the most?
At primary school we only really did maths, art and English, which was mostly storytelling. I enjoyed maths, and also went to a lot of clubs, including chess club. I thought I'd go on to do okay at secondary, but I soon realised that that English wasn't just about storytelling and struggled a bit.

I still did well at maths, though. That, food technology, art, PE – those hands-on, creative subjects were what I enjoyed most.

How easy was it balancing your football training and playing with your schoolwork?
No one knew I was doing football in my own time. and I didn't tell anybody there when I made it to the England under 16s and under 18s youth sides. We'd only go away at half term. My friends never found out about any of it until after I'd left school and was on telly – "*Oh, I never knew you played for England!*" I just didn't mention it.

I've always been driven, but I've never wanted to shout about it. Plus, there was a boy at our school who played for Fulham, and another who played for Watford, and they ended up with a lot of pressure being placed on them, on top of all the usual school stress. So I just kept it to myself.

What careers advice did you receive at school?
We never really had any. Maths was something I enjoyed even more than sport at times, but I didn't know where to go with it.

My PE teacher suggested I should study sports science, but learning the theory about how muscles work and all the rest of it was the side of PE I hated. My sole focus when I left school was that I just wanted to play football.

What can you tell us about being E.ON's New Energy Academy Trailblazing Ambassador?
I'm incredibly proud to be E.ON's Ambassador. Having experienced first-hand how vital the right guidance and support can be when making career decisions, I'm passionate about helping young people find their path.

This role is all about inspiring the next generation to explore the incredible opportunities out there - especially in careers that can create real, positive change. I want to empower young people to recognise their potential, take on challenges and pursue what they love – whether that's sustainability, sport or any other passion.

The New Energy Academy's free, curriculum-aligned resources are a fantastic tool for teachers to help their students build essential employability skills like communication, problem-solving, and adaptability – all qualities that I've found have been crucial throughout my football career.

Fara Williams is a broadcaster and former footballer, having played for Chelsea, Charlton Athletic, Everton and Liverpool, while also earning a record 172 caps for the England women's team. E.ON's New Energy Academy initiative is offering schools free KS3/4 resources themed around future-focused employability skills and sustainability, as well as careers-related information videos and a competition to win a skill-building workshop for your students; for more information, visit **eonenergy.com/new-energy-academy** (competition entries close **23rd May 2025**).

Navigating THE STORM

Ed Carlin shares his thoughts on how school staff can address the challenges of a negative parental culture

In an era defined by instant feedback and online discourse, schools are increasingly under the microscope. Not just from inspections and internal audits, but from a louder and often more volatile source – public parental opinion.

A single comment on social media can spiral into a chorus of criticism. An email, hastily written in frustration, can raise serious questions about a school's leadership. Some of this criticism will be constructive. Much of it, however, will emotionally charged, misinformed or disproportionate.

Here, I intend put forward an arguably unpopular, but necessary proposal – that instead of reacting defensively to negative parental culture, school leaders must instead take a calm, strategic approach rooted in professionalism, empathy and an unwavering focus on their core mission.

Understanding the nature of complaints

It's important to begin by unpacking the nature of parental complaints. Many aren't malicious in intent, but often born out of fear, frustration or a perceived lack of agency.

Take bullying, for instance. It's an emotive and deeply personal issue for families. When a child reports being mistreated, the emotions involved can override logic. Parents may question the school's integrity, its safeguarding procedures or even its values.

In such situations, the question then becomes – *can parents be meaningfully involved in shaping the solution, rather than simply being passive recipients of school decisions*?

True partnership requires shared ownership of problems. Rather than seeing parents as adversaries, could schools establish more proactive and transparent avenues for involvement? Parent forums, restorative circles or even co-designed anti-bullying charters could potentially give parents a voice before those issues start to escalate.

> **"Schools don't need to win arguments; they need to present reality"**

The 'customer service' parallel

Having previously worked in a supermarket, I've been able to observe up close the dynamics of how consumer complaints play out. A customer, unable to find their preferred product, would often approach a staff member with a mix of irritation and threat – "*I'll just take my custom elsewhere!*" It's a classic tactic, rooted in leverage.

And yet, my go-to response was never defensive. Instead, it was calm, understanding and honest: "*I can see you're disappointed, and of course, if another store can meet your needs better today, you should try that.*" Ironically, many of those same customers would return days later, complaint forgotten.

The parallel with schools is striking. Parents who might have once threatened to withdraw their child, or publicly denounce the school online may well return – often quietly – to the fold. The key isn't to escalate such confrontations, but rather to meet emotional responses with professional clarity.

Schools don't need to win arguments. They need to present reality, acknowledge feelings and stand firmly by their values.

The social media dilemma

Enter social media – *the* 21st-century amplifier of discontent. According to Ofcom's 'Online Nation 2023' report (see tiny.cc/ts144-PC1), over 70% of UK adults use social media daily – and as we all know, these platforms aren't bound by editorial oversight or accountability mechanisms. Any individual, regardless of context or evidence, can broadcast their grievances to an extremely broad audience.

Once upon a time, parental complaints would live in the car park, or over the dinner table. Now they're broadcast via Facebook community

pages, WhatsApp groups and local forums, often via language that's emotionally charged, accusatory and rarely fact-checked.

As Professor Sonia Livingstone, an expert in digital media, has previously observed, "*Online communication can encourage rapid responses, often bypassing reflection. Emotions tend to spread faster than facts.*"

But here's the problem – *we amplify their power when we panic*. A single Facebook post doesn't represent the majority. A loud parent isn't always a right parent. In fact, as shown by the DfE's 2021 Annual Parents Survey (see tiny.cc/ts144-PC2), over 80% of parents trust their child's school, and most are satisfied with the quality of their education provision.

These are reassuring numbers, though rarely the ones that make headlines.

The Risk of Over-Sensitivity

There's a growing concern that school leaders, understandably weary from years of crisis management and heightened scrutiny, are becoming too sensitive to criticism. While it's important to listen and reflect, it's equally important to not be derailed by minority voices.

We must remind ourselves of what we're here to do – educate, safeguard, and inspire young people. That requires resilience. As Brené Brown puts it, "*If you are not in the arena getting your ass kicked, I'm not interested in your feedback.*" That might sound harsh, but the sentiment is real.

Leadership isn't about appeasing everyone. It's about staying the course, even in the face of loud opposition.

Criticism will come. It always has. From calls to '*bring back the belt*', to accusations that, "*This school does nothing about discipline!*" schools have long been a battleground for the cultural values of their local communities. What's changed is the volume and the venue.

The long view

Ultimately, leadership in schools demands a long memory and a short fuse for offence. We can't afford to internalise every criticism, or chase every complaint down a rabbit hole. There will always be the voices of those who feel we're falling short, and sometimes, they may well be right. But often, they'll be projecting, reacting or speaking from a place of fear.

Our job is to remain rooted in our values, committed to the wellbeing of every child and connected to the many parents who can see the bigger picture.

To quote Aristotle, "*To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing.*" That's not an option for us. We are educators. We are leaders. And we are resilient.

So let's carry on. Let's keep the main agenda the main agenda. And let's remember – no angry comment can outweigh the quiet gratitude of a child who feels seen, safe and supported.

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

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

1 Listen without absorbing the toxicity
Validate feelings without accepting all claims as truth. Use phrases like, "*I can see this has upset you,*" or "*Let me explain how we approached the issue.*"

2 Offer transparency, not just reassurance
Where appropriate, invite parents into the process. Share policies, timelines and follow-ups – well-informed parents will be less likely to jump to conclusions.

3 Model professionalism
Never reply to online comments in kind. If a Facebook complaint escalates, reach out privately and calmly. Your tone will set the standard, especially for parental onlookers.

4 Celebrate the positive publicly
Flood your social media with positive news about student success, community events and staff shout-outs. This can reframe the school's narrative and drown out negativity.

5 Focus on your core community
Remember that most families are supportive – so lean into those relationships. Consider carrying out 'pulse checks' via surveys, coffee mornings and 'meet the head' events.

6 Train staff in conflict resolution
Front-facing staff – receptionists and pastoral leaders especially – need the skills to de-escalate conversations and redirect energy towards solutions.

Test your TEACHING

Gordon Cairns examines how Practitioner Enquiry casts teachers as researchers of their own practice – but could it ever take the place of CPD?

A growing number of UK schools are encouraging their teaching staff to undertake a 'Practitioner Enquiry' as a way to supplement, or even replace their traditional CPD training. By investing time, resources and academic input into their teaching staff, institutions hope to create conditions in which teachers can investigate aspects of their own teaching practice.

A recent in-depth longitudinal study into a number of such projects found that undertaking a Practitioner Enquiry can have a positive impact – though precisely how this impact lands might not be what the practitioner or their school might have expected…

Giving teachers agency

Of course, the concept of teachers examining their own methodologies has been around for a while. Around half a century ago, Lawrence Stenhouse recognised that teachers were, in effect, researching their own practice whenever they engaged in curriculum development. In the years since, educational thinkers have continued searching for ways of harnessing the desire of teachers to examine and improve their own practice.

And yet, the multitude of names given to this process reveals just how difficult the search has been for a definitive approach has been. Hence, we've seen the emergence of 'reflective practice', 'action research', 'teacher research', 'practitioner research', 'collaborative inquiry', 'critical enquiry' and even 'critical collaborative enquiry' – all implemented at various points by different educational authorities since the 1980s.

By 2019, the Welsh Government had come to favour the term 'Professional Enquiry', citing what it saw as "*Strong evidence to suggest that teachers, like other professionals, find this one of the most effective forms of professional development.*"

"You might think that encouraging young people to take part in outdoor learning will improve their sleep – but how can you quantify that?"

While there's now some general agreement that giving teachers the agency to examine their own practice with a view to improvement is a good thing, there's less uniformity of thought as to what makes a successful study. With scores of individual projects being carried out across the country aimed at ironing out personal classroom concerns, or simply sourcing evidence to back up an individual hunch, there's been relatively little research into what actually works, or does not work.

That changed last year, however, following the publication of a study by researchers at the Universities of Brighton and Buckingham, entitled 'Teacher practitioner enquiry: a process for developing teacher learning and practice?'

Unforeseen benefits

Academics Brian Marsh and Mark Deacon wanted to discover what made for a successful Professional Enquiry – and conversely, why other projects failed to work – so they established a five-year longitudinal study across five schools in the South of England, looking into the Professional Enquiries of 71 teachers.

Perhaps the biggest surprise from their findings was that, despite the obvious goal of any professional development being to improve young people's outcomes, there seemed to be scant evidence showing that class teachers researching their own practice were actually doing that. The data didn't support an explicit link between undertaking a Practitioner Enquiry and the raising of pupil attainment – even amongst those teachers who claimed otherwise when presenting their completed work.

The researchers simply found it impossible to disentangle the specific impact of a given enquiry project from all the other elements of a school that naturally work together for students' benefit.

However, this shouldn't be taken to imply that creating research projects is pointless. On the contrary, note the report's authors, "*The findings point to taking part in practitioner research as a valuable form of teacher professional development. We found evidence of teachers becoming more confident and more knowledgeable in the collection and use of evidence. Moreover, there is evidence of the participant teachers learning about their own learning.*

"*For many, the research led to 'informed reflection' and it impacted on practice with benefits to their own teaching and leadership. There was a significant impact on the morale. As one senior leader said, 'I think the biggest impact is on teacher thinking rather than the outcome of their projects.'*"

A source close to the research adds that conducting a Professional Enquiry was able to make teachers more reflective practitioners. Participating in academic analysis is another benefit, as once teachers are qualified, they typically won't tend to read and reflect on what's out

there in terms of academic research. Practitioner Enquiry can thus be a way of making teachers more aware of the large bank of academic literature they don't have time to read.

Culture of enquiry

Furthermore, the report noted, "*There is evidence of improved professional practice, increased teacher agency and confidence, where the teachers constantly reflected on, and evaluated the effectiveness of their activities.*"

In terms of what made an enquiry successful, the researchers found that generally, those participants who "*Started with a focused enquiry question undertook work that not only led to changes in their own personal practice, but also had an impact at a departmental level (pastoral or subject teams) and occasionally at a whole school level with changes to policy and practice.*"

On the other hand, those projects that were either over-ambitious (such as 'Enhancing the quality of verbal interactions between students') or which lacked focus (see 'Developing academic resilience') were unsuccessful. And this perhaps reveals the key problem when starting a Practitioner Enquiry.

Given that most teachers will be 'lay people' with regards to academic research skills, many simply won't know whether the hunch they have is something that can be measured, quantified or indeed uncovered at all. You might think that encouraging young people to take part in outdoor learning will improve the quality of their sleep – but how can you possibly quantify that?

And yet, despite this, there are still some benefits for teachers undertaking a Professional Enquiry project. One is that teachers get to 're-professionalise' themselves, through deepening their thinking and understanding of their own practice. They gain practice in developing their voice, and have the opportunity to both enhance their professional agency and influence the thinking of their professional peers.

Marsh and Deacon found that turning Practitioner Enquiry into a viable, if not transformative professional development activity required that a number of conditions be met first. These included the need for 'a culture of enquiry' in schools, which could provide teachers with the ecological conditions needed to embark on their project, respect for their existing knowledge and support from both senior colleagues and university facilities, enabling practitioners to access any required literature and information.

This 'culture of enquiry' would also see practitioners regularly developing and controlling the focus of their enquiries, supported by collaborative problem-solving, stimulation and encouragement.

Locked into the theory

The biggest problem, however, comes when teachers set themselves the task of reading academic papers, peer-reviewed journals and other relevant literature that conflicts with their existing practice and beliefs.

According to one source close to the report, teachers can often become 'locked' into certain theories of teaching that were current at the start of their career. The report's researchers quote one teacher who was seeking to apply neurolinguistic programming techniques to their classroom behaviour management strategies: "*I've read some of the research papers. It is not how I've been taught. I just can't believe what I've read to be right.*"

At the other end of the scale, Nicola Daniel – curriculum leader for English at Broughton High School, Edinburgh – found her Practitioner Enquiry to be a positive experience. Writing for the General Teaching Council Scotland, she shared how, "*This project has led me to a better understanding of how boys learn, and why some aspects of male literacy fall behind girls. By being able to explain this to boys, I have found that this has helped boys feel that they are not stupid or weak, but that there is a reason for, say, poor handwriting – and a way to fix it.*"

Ideally, Marsh and Deacon's report into Professional Enquiry will give teachers a dose of realism before they embark on what can be an arduous and complex course of study. Commencing a deep dive into your own practice probably won't turn your students into geniuses – but it may well reinvigorate your thinking and sense of agency around your work, both of which are worthwhile goals.

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

WHY I LOVE...

We hear about the impact Academy21 has had among students unable to attend mainstream schooling

ABOUT US:

NAME: Eugene Dwaah

JOB ROLE: CEO

SCHOOL: Evolution Sports Group and Evolution Education

FAVOURITE FEATURE: Academy21's ability to tailor teaching to the students' individual levels and improve their engagement.

TALKING ABOUT: KEEPING STUDENTS FOCUSED AND ENGAGED

Academy 21
The Online Alternative Provision Experts

Contact:
0800 2088 210 | academy21.co.uk | contact@academy21.co.uk

How did your partnership with Academy21 begin?

I established Evolution Sports in 2017, having been Head of Behaviour & Engagement at Skinners Academy (Hackney), working with students who found it challenging to attend mainstream secondary schools. I brought on our centre manager Sayo, an ex-athlete, to help me run our sports-focused Alternative Provision. At Evolution Sports, KS3-4 students have the opportunity to pursue their sporting interests, gain vocational qualifications and develop important study and life skills.

As our provision developed, we started looking for a platform that could help us engage young people further and pitch learning at different ability levels. In 2024, we introduced Academy21 specifically to enhance our academic learning.

How have you used the platform?

A group of our KS4 students take Academy21's live adaptive lessons for English, maths and science. The students attend lessons each morning from a designated classroom within our premises. Using Academy21 has helped reduce lesson disruptions, enabling students to focus more effectively while working on laptops and wearing headphones, supervised and supported by our staff.

These morning lessons leave ample time for other activities afterwards, as well as in-person mentoring from Evolution Sports teachers. This hybrid arrangement helps students remain both focused and connected to the school environment, through which they can continue to develop collaboration and social skills. We're very happy with the response from our students and the progress we've seen – so much so, that we plan to extend the use of Academy21 next year for our younger students.

What difference has it made?

Since implementing Academy21, student engagement has improved significantly. One of our Y11 students, Shantay, tells us, "*I was just engaging straight away. It was so much easier.*" Features like private chats with teachers help to improve students' confidence over time, giving Shantay and others more positive and inclusive interactions. All Academy21 lessons are live and adaptive, which makes our students more eager to participate.

The personalised lessons have even inspired Shantay to set new academic goals: "*When I do my GCSEs, I feel like I can achieve four or five. I didn't think I could do that before.*"

Have you seen any positive impacts on students' mental health?

Previously, students who didn't want to engage were disrupting learning and frustrating those who did. Now, we don't have that issue. We can supervise classes and provide one-to-one support to any students who need it, helping them regain confidence.

Another positive impact we have seen from Academy21 extends beyond engagement. As Shantay says, "*My mental health was going downhill in a mainstream school. I'm feeling happier with myself and more joyful than I've ever been before.*" The welcoming, inclusive environment and personalised support from Academy21 teachers has made every student feel heard and empowered.

WILL IT WORK FOR YOU?

- **Live, adaptive lessons** – Tailored to each student's level, encouraging students to engage better
- **One-to-one support** – Students have the option of private chats, during which they can ask questions and receive personalised support
- **A hybrid model** – Academy21's online lessons can be combined with in-person mentorship and other school activities
- **Wellbeing support** – Experienced teachers make students feel welcomed and empowered to learn, improving their wellbeing

THE TS GUIDE TO... HEALTH & WELLBEING

We examine the youth mental health trends schools are having to grapple with; how to lighten the workplace pressures borne by your ECT colleagues – and why schools shouldn't have to choose between academic success or supportive learning environments...

IN THIS SECTION

IN FIGURES:

HOW HAPPY ARE THE COUNTRY'S CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

25.2%
of the UK's 15-year-olds report having 'low life satisfaction' – the highest proportion when compared to their peers in 27 other European countries

Source: PISA 2022

14.3%
of young people aged 10 to 17 in the UK report being unhappy with their experiences at school

18%
of the same group are 'often' or 'always' worried about their families' finances

Source: The Children's Society's household survey (conducted April to June 2024)

3 TEACHWIRE ARTICLES FROM THE ARCHIVES

IT'S NOT A LACK OF 'RESILIENCE' THAT NEEDS FIXING
Rather than extol the merits of 'resilience' to young people, let's change our expectations, economics and environment for the better, says Natasha Devon...
tiny.cc/144special1

CLOCKING OFF
A good work-life balance can be hard to attain, concedes Adam Riches – but we all need to ensure the job doesn't crowd out our personal space...
tiny.cc/144special2

LESS TALKING, MORE DOING
Kat Howard explains why wellbeing efforts in schools should involve less discussion and more concerted action
tiny.cc/144special3

"It's okay to not be okay"

Ann Marie Christian considers the magnitude of the mental health and wellbeing challenges students are experiencing, and how schools can effectively respond to them

After COVID-19, the media extensively covered the pandemic's impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people – particularly where their school attendance, ability to learn and educational outcomes were concerned.

For a time, this became a national talking point. Since then, the search for evidence showing what impact lockdown had on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing has yielded mixed findings. Some studies would seem to indicate that quarantined children faced a greater likelihood of developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Overall, however, the studies performed to date predominantly point to increased levels of distress, worry and anxiety, typically due to heightened feelings of loneliness, and worries about school and the future.

The scale of the issue

More recently, the NHS' official figures show that in 2023-24, there were 204,526 new referrals of patients aged 17 and under, where the primary cause given was anxiety. In 2019-20, immediately prior to COVID, that figure stood at 98,953. Post-pandemic, we've therefore seen a 107% increase in such referrals.

Now, five years on, the repercussions of COVID linger like a stubborn shadow. We've witnessed the protracted aftermath weave itself into the very fabric of our daily lives, leaving indelible marks that will run right through today's youth population. Similar to how young survivors are changed by wartime experiences, the echoes of the pandemic will continue to shape the thoughts, behaviours and futures of those who lived through it.

When schools first returned from lockdown, staff immediately observed an increase in social anxiety among students that impacted upon the attendance and academic performance of many. Language and phrases related to self-harm – "*I am suicidal*" or "*I want to kill myself*" – were heard more frequently. Across the country, designated safeguarding leads found themselves having to rapidly discern whether such utterances were genuine cries for help or 'just' especially heightened expressions of distress.

It quickly became evident that more children were now struggling with self-regulation, requiring additional support to readjust to daily school routines, socialise with peers and manage conflict. The combined effects of group bubbles, social distancing, the suspension of the curriculum and concerns about future grades began manifesting in difficult and challenging behaviours, as schools gradually returned to full-time operations after the second lockdown ended.

What are the causes?

Anxiety is a complex condition influenced by both genetic predisposition and environmental factors. There has been a visible rise in anxiety over recent years, perhaps seen most markedly among members of Generation Z – i.e. those born between 1997 and 2012 (see tiny.cc/ts144-A1).

According to a 2023 survey carried out by the Pew Research Centre (see tiny.cc/ts144-A2), social media has also been a major contributing factor to rises in anxiety among this group. The survey found that of the 95% of teens aged 13 to 17 who owned smartphones, 96% went online daily. A separate study conducted by Auxier (2020) found that 1 in 5 teens used TikTok and YouTube 'almost constantly'.

We know that young people have been exposed to harmful content via social media platforms, while at the same time recognising the rich learning opportunities available to them online – which may positively or negatively impact a child, depending on their circumstances.

We also can't overlook how shifts in family structures have been a source of anxiety for children and adolescents.

"The echoes of the pandemic will continue to shape the thoughts, behaviours and futures of those who lived through it"

The growing number of single-parent and dual-working households has led to increased stress on families and instances of hostile parenting. Compounding this are cost of living pressures, and the growing tendency for family homes to be located some distance away from extended family networks, in areas where community cohesion can be lacking.

A new approach

In tandem with these challenges, there's been a marked post-COVID rise in school refusal, and the number of families opting to home educate their children.

Having recognised these challenges, the government included some proposals for tackling them in its 'Plan for Change, Milestones for Vision' policy document published in December 2024 (see tiny.cc/ts144-A3), as part of its aim to break down barriers to opportunity.

The government has committed to improving children and young people's mental health and wellbeing in school, seeing this as important for improving standards and helping them to achieve better outcomes in their subsequent work and later life. The DfE has since stated that "Embedding an evidence-based, holistic, whole school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing helps to achieve this." (see tiny.cc/ts144-A4)

How should schools respond?

Schools have an essential role to play in nurturing and supporting the wellbeing of our children, guided by the government's recommendations. It's crucial that all staff who regularly interact with students and families recognise and empathise with the anxiety epidemic currently affecting many within our communities.

Through improved training and education via courses and workshops, we could equip staff, students and families alike with the tools needed to better understand and manage symptoms of anxiety. Mental health leads and mental first aiders based in schools can perform a valuable function in this regard, by helping to foster supportive environments in which help is readily available for those who might need it. Putting early interventions in place can contribute to the development of a safer culture, whereby children feel heard and understood, and know how to reach staff who can intervene where necessary. By creating an environment where '*It's okay not to be okay*,' we can send the message that anxiety is, in fact, a natural, very human emotion that happens to involve feelings of worry, fear, dread and uneasiness – all of which form part of the human brain's built-in fight-or-flight response to danger or stress.

If we're to achieve that, however, it's essential that we establish robust systems for identifying early signs of anxiety in children. These systems should involve close collaboration between class tutors, behaviour leads, attendance officers, admissions officers, SENCos and other key members of school staff.

Regular interdisciplinary meetings should be scheduled to thoroughly review children's wellbeing, behaviour and attendance. During such meetings, staff can assess any safeguarding concerns related to a particular child, and adopt a more holistic approach to providing whatever support they need.

By systematically sharing such observations and insights, we can reach a better understanding of every child's specific needs – thus facilitating more timely interventions and tailored support strategies that will ultimately result in them having a more positive experience of school.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Ann Marie Christian is a safeguarding and child protection expert; for more information, visit annmariechristian.com

THEN AND NOW

Supporting students' wellbeing was a stated aim of the Coalition government back in 2015, following the publication of a document entitled 'Promoting Children and Young People's Mental Health and Well-Being' (see **tiny.cc/ts144-A5**), which continued to be updated under subsequent governments.

This document included eight principles the government wanted to see from whole school approaches to supporting students' wellbeing:

1. An ethos and environment that promotes respect and values diversity
2. Targeted support and appropriate referral
3. Working with parents and carers
4. Enabling student voice to influence decisions
5. Staff development to support their well-being and that of students
6. Identifying needs and monitoring the impact of interventions
7. Curriculum teaching and learning to promote resilience and support social and emotional learning
8. Leadership and management that support and champion efforts to promote emotional health and well-being

This period also saw the publication of a Green Paper (see **tiny.cc/ts144-A6**), which proposed training and appointing senior mental health leads in every school, additional funding for mental health support teams who could provide early interventions, and the trialling of a 4-week waiting list for specialist support from the NHS.

ASK THE EXPERT

Breaking the cycle of school avoidance

Gareth Lucas-Howells tells us how Momenta Connect is offering schools a revolutionary solution for emotionally-based school avoidance.

What are the warning signs schools should look for?

Emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA) isn't simply a refusal to attend school; it's the feeling of being *unable* to go, due to anxiety or stress. Early identification of EBSA signs – such as avoidance behaviours and physical symptoms, like stomach aches – is crucial. Recognising these indicators will allow teachers to provide timely support and prevent long-term absenteeism.

What are some common EBSA triggers?

EBSA often stems from multiple factors at home, at school or a combination of the two. At home, a young person may be experiencing parental physical or mental health issues, or complex life changes such as divorce or bereavement.
At school, we often find that pupils are feeling overwhelmed with school work or exam pressures – or it may be that we're dealing with unmet or undiagnosed additional needs.

What difference can early intervention make?

Early identification is vital for the success of any school return efforts. With the right interventions in place from the start, we can work to foster trust, reduce anxiety and provide practical ways of removing barriers for individual pupils.
A gradual reintegration plan tailored to individual needs can help restore confidence and ease students back into the school environment, facilitating a smoother transition.

EXPERT PROFILE

NAME:
Gareth Lucas-Howells

JOB TITLE:
Managing Director

BEST PART OF MY JOB:
Developing affordable solutions to the complex challenges that schools face

How should schools communicate with parents regarding EBSA-related issues?

It's about using supportive, non-judgmental language to discuss concerns with pupils and parents, and not reverting to outdated ideas around 'refusal' and blame. Open-ended questions encourage dialogue and help students to express their feelings. Building trust through understanding and collaboration empowers students to share their challenges and seek help.

What might a whole school approach to EBSA look like?

By building on the strong foundations schools already foster – predictable environments, kindness and safe spaces – we see sustainable school return for pupils. Engaging families as partners in monitoring progress and developing support plans will ensure consistency, resulting in a sense of belonging. Ultimately, by taking a cohesive multi-disciplinary approach, we can help break the cycle of school absence.

ASK ME ABOUT

PERSONALISED THERAPY – which, in combination with live online learning, results in sustainable school return.
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THE ROLE OF REINTEGRATION SPECIALIST – and how to create a graduated, personalised and evidence-based plan for your returning pupils.
EARLY ASSESSMENT PROCESSES – and how Momenta 360 can identify the unique barriers to education for each pupil.

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Helping hands

With ECTs under more pressure than ever during their trainee year, **Amy Sayer** looks at what schools can do to support them and keep new recruits within the profession

The government's School Workforce Census tells us that approximately 11.3% of ECTs leave the profession after just one year of teaching in the classroom (see tiny.cc/ts144-ECT1). That's clearly a problem – so what can school communities do to better support their trainee teachers during placements, and hopefully ensure that they stay in the profession for longer?

First, there needs to be some acknowledgement that schools are under pressure to address growing mental health needs among pupils. Many young people referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) either find themselves on long waiting lists, or are found to not meet a threshold for support that's become more stringent since the pandemic.

This has often resulted in teaching staff providing day-to-day mental health support for children despite lacking adequate training to do so. For ECTs in particular, this can in turn affect their own mental health via 'vicarious trauma'. This group needs both adequate support to ensure they can meet the demands of their training year, plus a wellbeing toolkit they can use to monitor and maintain their mental health in a way that works for them.

Reasonable adjustments

As a subject tutor and ITT wellbeing coach, I've previously worked alongside a number of trainees with pre-existing mental health conditions or neurodiversities which, if they're not sufficiently supported by their training providers, mentors and wider school community, can lead to overwhelm. There needs to be space within the application process for trainees to disclose any long-term conditions and additional needs. This will ensure that any reasonable adjustments can be put into place from the start, giving them the best support possible from the interview process onwards.

Providing trainees with specific guidance on how to maintain their wellbeing from the start of their training will further help to embed good self-care routines from the beginning of their first placement. There also needs to be shared understanding of their placement school's support systems, so that they're aware of who to speak to if they recognise the signs in themselves that they may need extra support.

Ideally, this information should be presented as an FAQ-style document, with each form of support and its purpose clearly explained. If, for example, a trainee is having a tricky time with managing behaviour, who else, besides their mentor, will they be able to talk to, or perhaps observe and learn from? If they're experiencing a personal health problem that's impacting upon their teaching, and don't feel comfortable talking to their mentor, is there anyone else they can turn to?

Be curious

It can also be helpful for trainees to obtain copies of the placement school's staff policies as soon as possible. Should the trainee require any reasonable adjustments to their school duties – such as more flexible clothing options, due to sensory needs – these can be implemented from the start of their placement with support from their mentor, rather than part-way through.

A trainee may require specific assistive software, or extensions to certain deadlines to support their dyslexia. Taking the time to be curious, and talk about the needs they have will make a huge difference to how well trainees fare in their training placements, and increase the likelihood of them staying in the profession.

Some schools will offer access to on-site counselling services, while others will have bought into an Employee Assistance Programme that may include a series of phone counselling sessions – both of which can quickly provide support to any trainees struggling with their mental health before things start to spiral. There are also many ITT providers that now offer one-to-one wellbeing sessions for trainees, giving them a safe, confidential space in which to discuss their wellbeing concerns. It's important to also signpost other external support services, such as Education Support, Shout or The Samaritans.

The pressures trainee teachers now face during their training year have increased significantly, due in part to the rise in mental health struggles among young people. Without appropriate support, this can take an emotional toll. Trainees with pre-existing mental health, physical or neurodiverse conditions must also be provided with reasonable adjustments so they can feel supported and, crucially, unashamed of any support needs they may have.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Amy Sayer is a freelance mental health trainer, writer and workshop facilitator for West Sussex Mind

The best of BOTH WORLDS

Schools don't have to prioritise academic outcomes over their pupils' emotional wellbeing, says **Alice Guile** – not when the two can happily go hand-in-hand...

Michaela Community School in North London is renowned for its strict rules, silent corridors and for employing the 'SLANT' methodology – Sit up; Listen; Ask and answer questions; Nod your head; Track the Speaker.

The school gets incredible results, with headteacher Katherine Birbalsingh reporting that 52% of the GCSE grades achieved at the school in 2024 were grade 9. That compares favourably to the 53% grade 9 proportion at £60,000 per year Eton college. Yet Michaela Community School is notably a state school that declares itself to be non-selective.

Strict discipline

Given such amazing results, one would assume that Michaela Community School ought to be held up as a model example for other British schools to emulate. Indeed, some schools have seen success by adopting their own versions of Michaela-style 'tough discipline', including Mercia School in Sheffield, which received an Outstanding rating from Ofsted for its efforts.

Stewards Academy in Essex, meanwhile, recently made headlines after adopting a robust policy of giving detentions to top set students scoring less than 90% on maths tests. Headteacher Stephen Drew claimed that the purpose of said detentions was to help students with their progress.

Outside of strict discipline measures, some schools have sought to improve outcomes by placing a stronger focus on subjects viewed as more traditionally 'academic', while reducing overall subject choice in the process. Michaela Community School, for example, doesn't include D&T, drama or ICT as part of its curriculum offer, while restricting the teaching of music to Y7 and Y8 only.

Instead, more curriculum time is devoted to those academic subjects – particularly maths and English – that count for double in the Progress 8 measure, compared to other subjects. The school also caps the number of GCSE subjects students can take at eight.

Fear of punishment

All this begs the question – what if *all* schools were to adopt similar policies of strict discipline methods, reduced subject choice and giving detentions to academic underachievers in order to boost results? Would this not improve standards of education across the country? We know the constant pressure that headteachers and other senior staff are under to get good results. If these tried and tested methods are found to get results, then it follows that more schools should use them, no?

While it's true that approaches to education based around fear of punishment can get students through exams, they can also take a toll on students' wellbeing, mental health and love of learning.

I left my job at a mainstream secondary school last July, and have since begun the next stage of my career, working as an art and design technology teacher within SEN education. I now regularly work with young people who have been unable to continue in mainstream schools themselves, including school refusers.

"The time might have come for us to reconsider exam outcomes as being the ultimate measure of a school's success"

Many of these young people are neurodiverse, and liable to experience meltdowns if they feel emotionally overloaded. At any SEN school, students' levels of wellbeing must go hand-in-hand with their levels of academic achievement – because if students aren't in the right emotional state, they simply won't learn (or even attend school at all).

Equal importance

I myself am neurodiverse, with a diagnosis of ADHD and strongly suspected autism. I know only too well the struggles of trying to fit into a neurotypical world. If I'd attended a school where I could have been given a detention for not tracking or making constant eye contact with teachers, I doubt I'd have wanted to go. Constant eye contact – especially when forced into it under threats of punishment – is likely to be hard for many autistic young people.

Even among students remaining in mainstream education, the pressure to achieve good grades can be a source of huge anxiety. The Mix (themix.org.uk) is a UK service that provides online mental health support for under 25s. In a survey it carried out last year of young people using its services, 79% of respondents told the charity they had been negatively impacted by their most recent exams.

80% meanwhile said they had experienced panic in the run-up to their exams, with 65% saying that their most recent exams had 'negatively impacted their relationship with their family'. A startling 41% of the young people surveyed moreover felt that their parents cared more about their results than them.

The survey's findings suggest that more perhaps needs to be done to better support young people struggling with exam stress – but also that the time might have come for us to reconsider our continued heavy reliance on exam outcomes as being the ultimate measure of a school's success.

What if, measured via a system of comprehensive national surveys, young people's mental health and wellbeing at 16 was considered as equally important a marker of a school's success as its exam results?

Reframing 'successful schooling'

Some schools and organisations are now taking steps to actively promote wellbeing strategies to their students, in an effort to combat the stress that constant pressure to achieve results can cause. The Mindfulness in Schools Project (mindfulnessinschools.org) is a charity seeking to equip educators with the skills needed to lead mindfulness and meditation sessions. One of its ambassadors is Esther Ghey, whose daughter Brianna was murdered in 2023. She credits mindfulness with helping her process the grief of losing her daughter, and is encouraging educators to help students see mindfulness as a useful tool for coping with difficult situations.

Elsewhere, The Avanti School in Stanmore, North London promotes wellbeing by adopting a philosophy based on Hindu teachings (and while it serves primarily Hindu students, admissions are open to all). The school organises regular meditation, philosophy and yoga sessions, and prides itself on prioritising a holistic approach to education over narrowly focusing on exam results. This balanced approach doesn't seem to have prevented the school from obtaining good exam results regardless, with 79% of its GCSE awards in 2024 falling between grades 5 to 9.

With adolescent mental health issues continuing to rise, it's becoming evident that schools must do more to help young people become well-adjusted, successful adults. We need to reframe 'successful schooling' as encompassing more than solely getting good grades, and move towards a new model of successful schooling that does as much to support the emotional health of pupils as their academic performance.

Living a successful life involves considerably more than just earning the 'right grades' and setting your sights on a high-paying jobs – as can be seen by the many people in the world who *did* get all the right results, and the good jobs, but who still aren't happy.

The importance of empathy, self-awareness and learning – driven by curiosity, rather than fear of punishment – should never be forgotten.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Alice Guile is a secondary school art teacher

The feel-good factor

Provide your students with the emotional guidance, support and assistance they need, with the help of these wellbeing-themed tools, books and sources of expertise...

1 Bite Back

Bite Back is a youth-led movement challenging a broken food system. Eating healthily should be easy, but for many young people, it's not. Junk food dominates high streets, and too often, the healthy option isn't the easy option in secondary school canteens either. It doesn't have to be this way.

Co-founded in 2019 by Jamie Oliver, Bite Back has successfully campaigned for free school meals during the holidays and the upcoming junk food ad ban across TV and social media. Over 200 schools have joined our fully funded programme, helping students identify and remove the systemic barriers to healthy eating. From new salad bars and shorter queues, to fairer pricing and attractive hydration stations, change *is* possible. Applications are open now – build students' skills and create lasting change in your school by visiting **biteback2030.com**.

2 Fresh Air Fitness

Boost pupils' physical health and mental wellbeing with a new outdoor gym! Fresh Air Fitness is an award-winning provider of outdoor gym equipment for secondary schools, designing, manufacturing and installing gyms into secondary schools for over a decade.

Our gyms improve pupils' cardio health, muscular strength and definition, boosting their moods and self-esteem, and increasing their focus once back in the classroom.

We offer a professional, friendly service, with cost effective solutions to suit all budgets. Our robust and durable equipment is quick to install, requires low maintenance and comes with 25 years' warranty. For more details, visit **freshairfitness.co.uk,** email **sales@freshairfitness.co.uk** or contact **01483 608 860**.

3 Gratitude Kindness Self-Love Journal

Empower your students with the Gratitude Kindness Self-Love weekly guided journal – an engaging, age-appropriate tool designed to nurture emotional wellbeing, build resilience and encourage positive habits and routines.

With reflective prompts, creative exercises and kindness trackers, this journal helps secondary school students develop self-awareness, empathy and confidence. It's easy to integrate into tutor time, PSHE lessons or wellbeing programs, supporting a calm and mindful classroom environment.

Give your students the tools to thrive, both inside and out, by equipping your classroom with the journal that makes a lasting impact. Order now, and inspire a generation of kind, confident learners – see **magnificentmemagnificentyou.com** for more details.

4 Momenta 360

Momenta 360 from Momenta Connect provides a comprehensive pathway back to education for secondary pupils struggling with emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA). With 1 in 5 pupils regularly missing school, and 1 in 6 facing mental health challenges, schools are under more pressure than ever to find effective strategies for successful school return.

The Momenta 360 approach focuses on moving pupils from isolation to inclusion, and addressing the root causes of their absenteeism. From early assessment to personalised therapeutic intervention and live online learning, pupils are supported every step of the way with a specialist Reintegration Coach. Our rapid, no-wait access ensures vulnerable pupils will receive the support they need to thrive in school and beyond. Find out more at **momentaschoolsupport.co.uk**.

Discover Tamsin Winter

May 2025 sees the publication of *I Dare You* – an unforgettable story from author Tamsin Winter about the potential dangers of social media and online dares.

Perfect for fans of Holly Smale and Jacqueline Wilson, Tamsin's award-winning books have been praised by teachers and librarians across the UK for their ability to engage teen readers and tackle difficult subject matter, including body confidence and bullying.

Tamsin Winter has been teaching, travelling the world and daydreaming for most of her adult life – find out more at **usborne.com/tamsinwinter**.

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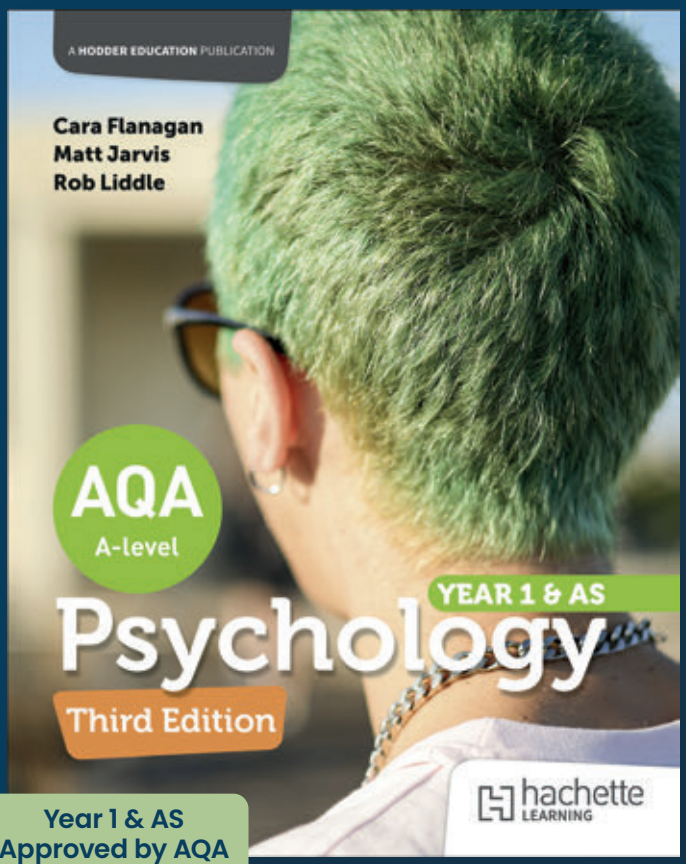

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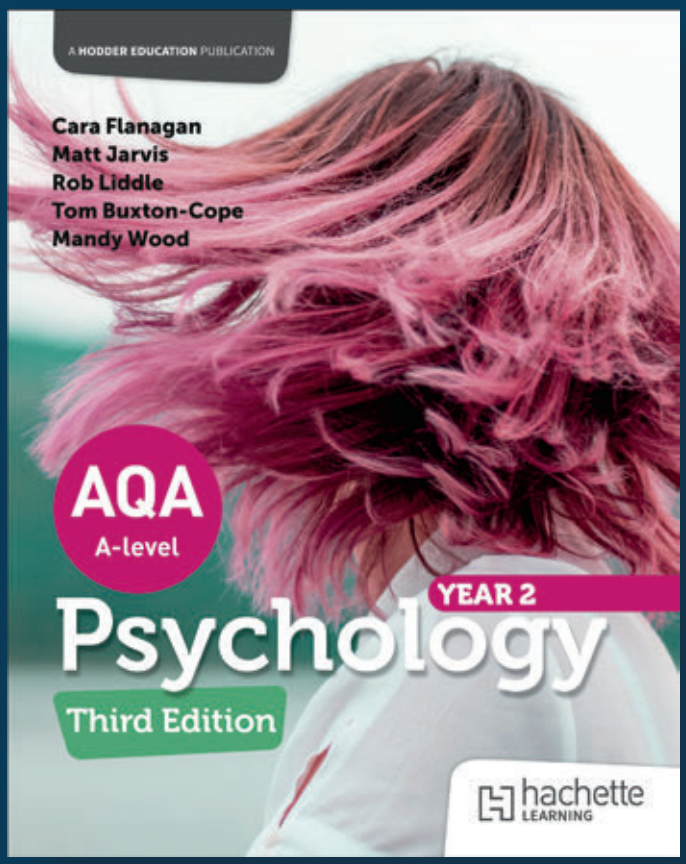

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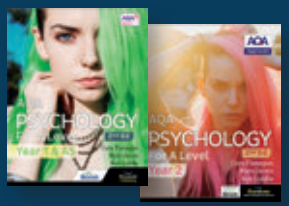

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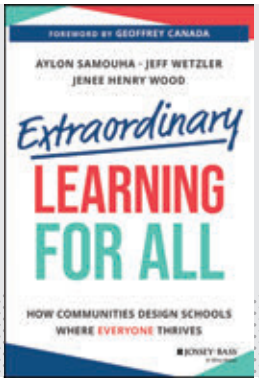
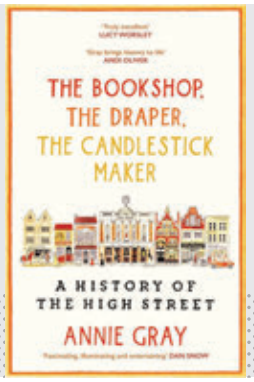
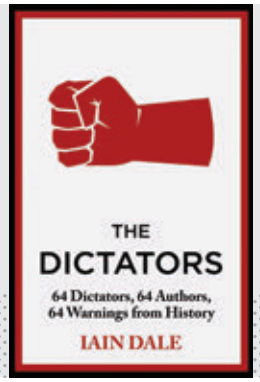






Extraordinary Learning for All

(Aylon Samouha, Jeff Wetzler and Jenee Henry Wood, Jossey-Bass, £24.99)

This book looks at the way schools are traditionally designed to satisfy needs dating back to a hundred years or so. Much more could be achieved in terms of pupils' individual fulfilment, argue the authors, if the curriculum, design of the school day and wider community were actively involved. They proceed to show how their suggested remedies – including project- and problem-based learning, work experience and learning in non-school venues – can be implemented and why they work. Unfortunately, however, said proposals would inevitably require a level of collaboration, time investment and funding that would effectively act as barriers to entry in the current UK climate. That said, as a source of potential ideas and inspiration, the book could be very useful indeed. The case studies it details may be US-centric, but are still interesting illustrations of what can be achieved.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

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

The Bookshop, The Draper, The Candlestick Maker: A History of the High Street

(Annie Gray, Profile, £22)

This might seem like an esoteric book at first glance, but it warrants closer inspection. Taking readers from the Middle Ages to (more or less) the present day, Gray charts how the places where we do our shopping and what we buy have changed over the centuries. Along the way we gain a deeper understanding of societal and economic history, alongside the references you'd expect to Pepys and other English classroom mainstays. In that context, it could provide some useful context when studying Austen's Bath episodes. There are sections in the book dedicated to specific trades, including the titular tailors, as well as examinations of towns outside of London. Despite the huge volume of research that clearly went into its creation, this is no dry, academic tome. Warmly recommended.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

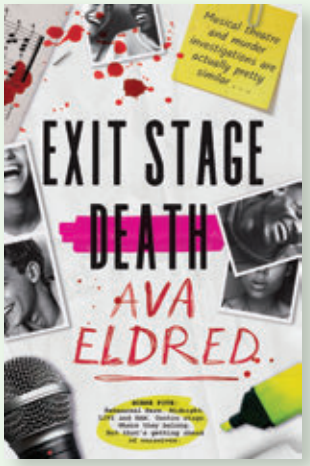
The Dictators: 64 Dictators, 64 Authors, 64 Warnings from History

(Iain Dale (ed.), Hodder & Stoughton, £30)

In some respects one could view this book as a single warning repeated 64 times. In as many chapters, it covers a number of familiar names – including Attila the Hun, Ho Chi Minh and, of course, Hitler – in chronological order, from ancient times to the present day. A fascinating opening chapter sets the scene by discussing the psychology of dictators and the traits they can often share. Despite each of the following chapters being penned by a different author, the book hangs together remarkably well, serving up some compelling insights into the machinations of dictators through the ages, making it a potentially useful reference for political studies and history. There might be a surprising omission or two – such as Trujillo and Vlad the Impaler – but 64 is surely enough to be getting on with...

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

ON THE RADAR



Exit Stage Death
(Ava Eldred, UCLan Publishing, £8.99)

Timeless 'coming of age' concerns, emotional intensity, some smart metatextual commentary on the acting tradition and the nature of fame, social media critiques and a compelling 'whodunnit' to unravel – it's all here in this exuberant YA novel.

An established writer and producer of stage musicals, Eldred's expertise is very much in evidence throughout *Exit Stage Death*'s frequent switching between first-person prose and passages presented as actor's scripts. That might sound gimmicky, but it gives depth to our teenage narrator – aspiring actor Livi Campbell, preparing to attend her last summer at the Camp Chance performing arts retreat – with the script style elegantly conveying the tendency of many a theatre kid towards flights of fancy and seeing themselves as the main players in their own drama. But things take a distinctly darker turn after a fellow Camp Chance attendee is found to have died under mysterious circumstances...

Between its likeable cast of supporting characters – son of Hollywood acting royalty Aaron, charismatic Camp Chance first-timer Daisy, self-doubting social media success story Juliet – and numerous knowing references to the likes of *Wicked*, *Heathers* and *A Chorus Line*, it's a heady stew that any fan of murder mysteries and/or musical theatre will very much enjoy.

The Game Changers
(Tim Clare. Canongate, £26.99)

Despite the relative paucity of immediately obvious National Curriculum links, teachers will find several of sections of this book to be highly engaging. First, there's the veritable plethora of different games, many of which will likely be unfamiliar to the general reader. Secondly, there's the range of uses to which said games can be put – including divination, making judgements and, naturally, plain old enjoyment. Finally, there's the learning to be had from exploring the sometimes disagreeable history of said games. More broadly, the book tells a historical story of (usually) friendly rivalries, productive co-operation and shrewd strategies, providing plenty of potentially useful material for PSHE classroom discussions and introductions to economics. Who knows – reading about the variety of games here may even encourage the invention of a few more newer ones...

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

Outstanding
(Steve Baker, £12, Simon & Schuster)

Baker's CV includes a stint as an English teacher, before going on to advise local authorities on matters relating to behaviour and attendance. Those bona fides are on full display in the narration and characters of *Outstanding* – a comedic novel that follows the events surrounding an increasingly chaotic Ofsted school inspection. We're very much in 'satirical farce' territory here, and while there are some pointed digs at the regulator's values and modus operandi – and an unflinching portrayal of battered and exhausted school leadership in the form of hapless headteacher Harry Flanagan – there's less anger and fewer didactic monologues than you might expect. What you do get is a pacey, entertaining read with some enjoyably bonkers plotting and carefully deployed pathos, which one suspects will resonate a great deal with any teacher who's ever had to struggle through a lesson before the watchful eyes of an HMI...

Meet the author

STEVE BAKER

You began writing the book in 2014 – so it's been something of a slow burn?

I'd always written – pantomimes for a local am dram group, humorous poems to amuse friends, but nothing that was ever published. I decided to take a correspondence course, and one of the tasks was to plan a novel. I don't know where the ideas came from, but I managed to create a story outline for what would become the book and continued working on it over the next few years.

I moved away from it for a bit to write a book on behaviour for Crown House (2023's *That Behaviour Book*), but eventually came back to it and developed the ideas further into a finished novel.

The book's satirical intent is fairly clear – was that always the plan?

It's meant to be funny. It does tackle some important issues, but my major motivation wasn't to angrily settle some scores – '*I'm going to tell the world what I think!*' I wanted to make people laugh by writing about what I know, which is education.

So my prime motivation was to entertain, but particularly in light of recent events, I couldn't tackle the topic of Ofsted inspections without also addressing some of the feelings that process prompts in school staff, and the many pressures it can place upon teachers and headteachers.

To what extent are book's characters and events based on your real life experiences?

The inspiration for the story's headteacher, Harry Flanagan, came from a 1987 TV series called *Hardwicke House* that was so bad it got cancelled after just several episodes. There was this bumbling, inept, slightly overweight and rosy-cheeked character played by Roy Kinnear. That was who I had in mind.

There was some real world inspiration behind [*Senior Ofsted inspector*] Arthur Nally, though, who's based on somebody I encountered in my career who I thought was just a tad self-important...

Is there anything else you hope readers take away with them when they read the book?

There's an element of wanting people outside teaching to understand what it's really like. You hear people complaining about the holidays teachers get, but until you've tried it, you just don't know. At school, we had these off-timetable days, where people from various employment sectors would give careers talks to the kids, and this Armed Forces guy once came in, dressed in camouflage and carrying a dinghy. At morning break, he staggered over to me, asking "*How do you* **do** *this...?*"

Steve Baker is a freelance education consultant, currently supporting academies in Yorkshire, Birmingham and North Wales

Make space FOR THE MESS

Lewis Wedlock discusses what schools can do to help teenage boys meaningfully explore what it means to 'be a man'

For secondary educators, the topic of masculinity often feels like an emotional minefield – one suffused with cultural anxiety, social media influence and an intense pressure to always get things 'right'.

For young men, these kinds of conversations are often a source of confusion, shame, defiance or even silence. For school staff, they're conversations that are often squeezed around lessons, unpredictable safeguarding demands and stretched resources.

There are lots of ideas, experiences and perspectives to consider when approaching work relating to masculinities within schools, and I'd argue it's never been more confusing to know where to start.

What I've learned over years working with young men in schools, however, is this – that the cultivation of meaningful, transformational engagement isn't to be found in knee-jerk, reactive responses. Instead, it's in those person-centered, slower and messier routes to learning. To transform cultures of masculinity in our schools, we need to first embrace the 'messiness' of masculinity itself.

Why listening comes first

One of the most consistent patterns I see in schools is the desire to talk *at* boys instead of talking *with* them. Staff will often seek to speedily shut down views or ideas that are harmful or provocative, and understandably so. But in this rush to respond, we can often skip a crucial step – that of *contextualising where these views are coming from*.

We can contextualise young men by visiting the worlds they're currently inhabiting; by engaging, asking questions and listening to their perspectives.

During my sessions with boys in secondary schools, I'll ask questions like "*What does it mean to 'be a man' in your school?*" and "*Who are you expected to be when you walk through the gates each morning?*" Their responses reveal a range of influences – from older siblings and peer groups, to influencers like Andrew Tate.

Some boys describe pressure to be 'hard', 'strong' or 'emotionally detached'. Others say they're unsure of what they're allowed to feel. These aren't just surface-level provocations, but rather insights into how masculinity functions as a social currency and compass within their everyday lives. It's their context that reveals the positions they take and the archetypes they assume. And it's precisely this context that we must explore further.

I strongly believe that as educators, we can't help teenage boys explore the depths of masculinity as a lived experience unless we first make space to hear *how* and *why* their current ideas have been crafted.

We can't help men develop their sense of self if we're not attuned to their current experiences. To do this, we must make space for them to arrive as they are, and to explore the vastness of what masculinity can entail. Again, this is messy, and potentially time-consuming, but it's work that I believe needs to occur.

> **"We can't help men develop their sense of self if we're not attuned to their current experiences"**

Making space

The current discourse around boys in secondary schools often centres on risks; of misogyny, peer pressure, disengagement, radicalisation. These concerns are valid, and absolutely warrant attention – but when explorations of masculinity become framed solely through a set of rigid lenses, boys can often feel 'under surveillance' rather than supported.

We can also talk in absolutes when it comes to masculine expressions, deploying terms like 'toxic' and 'healthy' when referring to distinct, binary experiences of maleness. There's a rigidity to our conversations around masculinity which can, at times, hinder the ways in which we approach the young men in our schools.

In my book, *Masculinities in Schools*, I talk about the importance of moving away from this 'rigidity' (approaching masculinity from a systematised, binary lens) and towards 'plurality' (embracing the multiplicity and contradictions of perspective and experience).

To attune to, and navigate around this I like to focus on four main components in my work with young men – *curiosity*, *non-judgement*, *safety* and *congruence*.

Four components

Curiosity is the ability to lean into an idea or expression, as opposed to simply pushing it away. This is particularly important when we consider that what we meet as educators may not be in alignment with our

own worldviews.

Non-judgement is the practice of ensuring that we meet an idea or belief relating to masculinity which may challenge our own values with acknowledgement – not outright judgement. It isn't enough to just lean in; we must be able to acknowledge without drenching that acknowledgement in a large dose of '*How **could** you?*' or '*That is **AWFUL!***'. The ideas in question may be challenging and problematic, but there are ways of engaging with young men that acknowledge present harms while centring their humanity.

Safety, meanwhile, refers to the cultivating of space for exploring different ideas and perspectives, without the need for socially desirable modification. To make room for transformation, young men need to arrive as they are.

Finally, **congruence** is facilitating and embodying from a position of authenticity; to not mask or embrace performativity, but to lead with the intention of modelling one's humanity. As educators, we must model what we seek from those in our care. To get 'real' responses and reflections, we need to embrace the 'realness' of ourselves as educators.

I speak to this in more detail in the book, but for now, I'll leave you with the following observation – that your young people can detect incongruence/'fakeness' from a mile away. Holding space effectively requires you to be aware of the space you're creating with your presence in the room.

Centring these four components can present a different pathway to exploration. It makes space for open-ended reflection, rather than top-down instruction.

This doesn't amount to avoiding challenge – but it *does* mean recognising that adolescent boys are in a life stage of meaning-making, and often lack safe spaces in which to process who they're becoming. By creating space for exploration, we can widen the scopes through which ideas of masculinity are contacted and conditioned.

Final reflections

Secondary school boys aren't finished products. They're still forming, emotionally, cognitively and socially. Like all of us, they need space to get things wrong, to reflect and to try again.

Yes, this work is messy – but in the mess, there's potential for growth and repair. For new models of what it means to be a boy, friend, learner and human being.

Secondary schools are uniquely positioned to hold that space. Not because they have all the answers, but because they are places in which relationships grow over time; where young people return day after day, and where trust can be built.

PRACTICAL STEPS

Here are some principles I regularly share with secondary school teams seeking to develop meaningful work around masculinities:

1. Understand the conceptual landscape
2. Attune to the worlds of the young men you serve
3. Actively engage as educators
4. Model what you seek
5. Frame challenge through care
6. Embrace uncertainty and getting things wrong

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lewis Wedlock is an educator, social psychologist and mental health professional; specialising in masculinities and young people-centred mental health interventions, Lewis has worked with secondary schools across the UK to help young men explore their ideas of masculinity; for more information, visit **lewiswedlock.com**

Working in partnership

Find out how **Academy21** is putting partnership working squarely at the heart of its online alternative provision

We spend a great deal of time at Academy21 discussing how to achieve mutual understanding and sustainable partnerships with the schools and authorities that need online Alternative Provision – and rightly so.

The benefits can be profound, not least on the learners at the heart of our work. We have, for example, worked with one AP provider to complement their holistic, community-based provision with live academic lessons to fit around their schedule.

In all cases, increased awareness, more tailored programmes and innovative approaches are built on the trust that only an effective two-way endeavour can provide. Partnerships like these always take time to build – but there are a few key considerations that can make all the difference.

Make time upfront

Effective partnership working requires mutual understanding from the very beginning – something that can't be overstated when it comes to Alternative Provision arrangements.

This is why we always start by taking time to understand the context the commissioner is in, and the local needs of their setting. We've seen the power that discovery and planning meetings can have in yielding understanding of commissioners' requirements and desired outcomes for students. This will form the foundation of a personalised programme that gives the student the most appropriate support from day one.

"We can't assume every partner will need the same support"

Anticipate needs

Next, we've found that anticipating a commissioner's needs is crucial for helping them secure buy-in from students and their families. This way, everyone can be confident about what the provision should achieve.

To do this well, however, we can't assume that every partner will need or want the same forms of support. We provide welcome packs, live inductions, parent information, demos of our system and sample videos, all with the aim of helping school leaders, who want a student to join Academy21, explain the decision they've made to others.

Importantly, this includes showing how our live teaching works, often via in-person visits by our partnership colleagues to the school. This is an investment in the relationship, but also provides important insights into what that community may need from us.

Be flexible

Being attentive and responsive to emerging needs is key when building successful partnerships with schools to support vulnerable learners.

At Academy21, our teaching is relational and adaptive, allowing us to pivot and overcome challenges in the classroom so that students are successful. We ensure that every student is placed in the right group for their individual ability, and that lesson times fit the partner school's placement and timetabling needs.

These flexibilities might sound simple, but they can make an outsized difference to the quality of our collaborations because of how they remove friction.

Communicate proactively

Another critical aspect of effective partnerships is the quality of reporting. Commissioners need to be kept up to date and understand how their investment in the child is progressing.

In environments where investment and funding can be scarce, being mindful of the questions and monitoring your partner must work through really matters. It's about trying to imagine what they need to know, and what they will be asked.

In our experience, this has led to enhanced lesson-by-lesson and daily attendance reports, as well as the daily progress updates entered by teachers. This has prompted us to place a greater focus on student recognition and celebration – both in terms of how we share feedback, and by introducing more formal certification and praise.

Our prioritising of communication extends to rapid reporting of any welfare and safeguarding concerns, so that students' wellbeing comes first. With clear mechanisms and key contacts in place, there's much less friction if any issues need to be resolved.

Such partnerships are crucial for navigating the resourcing, expertise and social challenges the education sector faces. The key now is to devote time and show willingness to adapt, communicate more and genuinely try to understand each other's needs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Alessandro Capozzi is Executive Headteacher at Academy21

Academy21 exemplifies the power of partnership working, offering a holistic package across two educational settings – one onsite and one online. To find out more and discuss your needs, visit **academy21.co.uk**

First things first

Ofsted may have tried to improve inspectors' interpersonal skills, but its inspections are still undercut by some longstanding issues, says **Adrian Lyons**...

A few years back, when I was still an HM Inspector. Ofsted had been seeking a new tagline, and eventually settled on the phrase, '*A force for improvement*.'

I suggested at the time that the word 'force' might carry the wrong connotation – this being an era in which even the Police were shifting towards the language of service, rather than force. It seemed tone-deaf. I therefore proposed, '*A service for improvement*' – but my suggestion fell on deaf ears. Back then, Ofsted was still positioning itself as a no-nonsense disrupter eager to make its presence felt.

Deeper issues

Fast forward to 2024, and the winds appeared to be shifting once again. Following the coroner's damning verdict into the tragic death of headteacher Ruth Perry – which cited an Ofsted inspection as a contributing factor – the regulator responded by signalling a softer, more empathetic tone. The arrival of Sir Martyn Oliver as HM Chief Inspector in January of that year had been marked by a pause in inspections, allowing lead inspectors to receive basic training in mental health awareness.

This initiative was then revisited the following autumn, via a 100-minute training session titled 'Setting Off on the Right Foot.' The core messages at this session included:

- Build positive relationships with school leaders and staff from the start
- Apply mental health awareness to alleviate stress and anxiety during inspections
- Reflect on how inspection practice can support the wellbeing of schools and inspectors alike

These were – and still are – noble aims, but they only scratch the surface of much deeper cultural and structural issues. Two problems in particular remain unaddressed – the pressure to meet unrealistic inspection targets, and the continued use of cliff-edge judgements (high stakes decisions that can alter a school's trajectory). Now, despite calls for reform, the latter is set to actually see *more* use as of next summer.

An impossible position

Many inspectors find themselves expected to deliver decisive evaluations under rigid time frames, while also being mindful of the emotional toll *their very presence* has on school staff. In this context, it's perhaps no surprise that some inspectors avoid issuing lower grades altogether.

Anecdotally – albeit backed up by analysis of recent grade profiles – there's growing concern that fear of a backlash has compromised the reliability of inspection outcomes.

One former colleague recently recounted two troubling cases in which respected inspectors were removed after the first day of inspection for being 'too negative'. They were replaced with more 'amenable' inspectors – at the schools' request – and left unpaid for the second day, having already incurred travel and accommodation expenses.

Professional conduct

When talking to colleagues about this variability between inspectors, the phrase 'pot luck' comes up. One MAT leader I work with had high hopes when one of his strongest schools came up for inspection, its strength consistently confirmed by internal and external reviews. So it came as a shock when, by the end of day 1, the lead inspector signalled a possible 'Requires Improvement' (Grade 3) for Quality of Education.

This unpredictability speaks to a fundamental weakness of the current system – the lack of robust assurance that schools will receive a fair and consistent inspection experience.

Ofsted does operate a system of on-site quality assurance visits, but these are hampered by unrealistic inspection schedules that stretch HMI capacity too thin. High turnover among HMIs has additionally depleted the expertise needed for effective quality assurance. Finally, the evaluation criteria for inspections places minimal emphasis on professional conduct. Out of five criteria, only one (briefly) touches on whether a lead inspector's integrity and professionalism reflects Ofsted's values.

As Dame Christine Gilbert's 2024 learning review of Ofsted made clear (see tiny.cc/ts144-01), Ofsted expects accountability and transparency from schools during inspections – yet provides none to its staff or its leadership in return.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Adrian Lyons was one of His Majesty's Inspectors between 2005 and 2021 and now works with MATs, teacher training providers and LAs to support education; find out more at **adrianlyonsconsulting.com**

THIS WAY!

School improvement advice for headteachers and SLT

RECRUITMENT | STAFFING | TRAINING

Personnel PROBLEMS

Anthony David shares his advice on how to recruit much-needed teaching staff for shortage subjects

Filling those vital posts within shortage subjects can seem like an impossible task – but there are ways and means of covering the lessons you need to cover without compromising the integrity of your curriculum offer. Here's how.

I run a small group of schools across London, and for the last three years we haven't had to employ a single supply teacher. However, that's not to say that our recruitment process is an entirely stress-free process.

Believe it or not, there was once a time when I actively looked forward to it. After all, a new teacher will typically bring with them a set oqf fresh ideas, enthusiasm and a unique perspective that can enrich our school community. Recruitment today, however, is no longer just about filling gaps; it requires careful strategy, long-term thinking and a focus on sustainability.

Define what you need and why

Before rushing to advertise a role, ask yourself, *'What do we actually need?'* Recruitment should never be a kneejerk reaction to a resignation. Instead, you should assess your staffing needs through the lens of long-term planning.

Are you thinking short-term, to fill a sudden vacancy? Or do you need a more permanent solution? If a teacher is going on maternity leave, for instance, will you require a like-for-like replacement, or can you restructure timetables and use internal resources to cover the absence?

One of the best ways of ensuring continuity in teaching is to develop a flexible and skilled team. Mapping skill sets across departments allows you to readily identify staff members who can step up in times of need.

For example, when one of our schools faced the sudden departure of a physics teacher – a subject that's *notoriously* difficult to recruit for – we didn't immediately seek an external replacement. Instead, we assessed our existing team and found a maths teacher with a physics background.

With some additional training and support, this teacher was then able to take on key physics lessons while we looked into arranging a more permanent solution. Adopting this approach not only meant that we were able to ensure consistency for our students, but also provided some valuable career development for the teacher concerned.

The art of effective recruitment

Once we established the need, the next challenge was finding the right candidate. In an increasingly competitive market, simply placing an advert on the *Tes* website is no longer enough. Below are some different strategies that have previously worked for us:

- **Grow Your Own Talent**
  We have established strong partnerships with teacher training providers and universities to ensure a steady pipeline of enthusiastic new teachers who are already familiar with our school culture. Typically, we'll aim to train SCITT students across different sites so that we can support need across the group as and when it arises.
- **Apprenticeships / Subject Knowledge Enhancement**
  Encouraging non-traditional routes into teaching, such as apprenticeship schemes and SKE courses, has helped us secure candidates for shortage subjects like maths, physics and computing. For example, we recently helped a highly skilled science technician complete a teaching apprenticeship, resulting in a committed and highly knowledgeable new member of staff.
- **Re-engaging former teachers**
  There's a significant pool of qualified teachers who have left the profession due to work-life balance concerns. Offering part-time and flexible working arrangements has enabled us to bring experienced teachers back into the classroom. One of our most successful recruits last year was a former English teacher returning after a career break. By tailoring a part-time role to fit her availability, we filled a key vacancy.

  Our experience of advertising for part-time teachers is that there are many teachers out there who are more interested in working three days a week than full time. That might say a lot about the demands of the role, but it's a strategy we've used in many cases to recruit very strong, committed teachers.
- **International Recruitment**
  With the right support, international teachers can be an invaluable asset. Our group of schools has successfully recruited highly skilled teachers from overseas, particularly in subjects facing acute shortages – but this involves careful planning around visa sponsorships, cultural integration and pastoral support, and a different approach to recruitment.

  It might not be possible to 'see' a lesson being taught by the candidate, but having them send over a video of them teaching is a good way of getting round this – with the added advantage that you can see how they set out their learning environment, and how they interact with children they know well.

Retaining staff

Recruitment is only half the battle; retention is equally, if not more important. After all, what's the point of recruiting a brilliant teacher,

TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN 2025

Each year, education data specialist SchoolDash, in partnership with the Gatsby Foundation and Teacher Tapp, produces a review of recruitment trends across the country's schools. So, how are things going for secondary schools on that front in 2025?

Up, then down

Well, it's a mixed picture. Compared to last year, there's been a 31% drop in teacher recruitment across secondary schools and colleges in England, though it should be noted that this followed three consecutive years of higher than usual recruitment activity.

That said, the review also points out that school enrolments remain squeezed, and that schools remain just as exposed to less than ideal labour market conditions as any other sector, resulting in more cautious recruitment decisions across the board – as seen by the 45% of secondary headteachers who are expecting to reduce their teacher headcount as of next September.

Levelling off

Beyond that, the review's authors observe that fewer teachers seem to be changing jobs, after a spike in turnover following the pandemic.

Headteacher turnover rates are similarly down across both primary and secondary, to the point where they're now at, or even slightly below those pre-pandemic – though just 42% of deputy and assistant headteachers currently aspire to become headteachers themselves.

Subject analysis

The review also charts the changing picture over time of teacher recruitment according to subject.

Based on an analysis of job advert placings, the review's authors conclude that since 2018/19, the smallest declines in recruitment can be seen in arts (-8%), humanities (-16%) and technology (-17%) subjects.

Conversely, the most marked declines have been in English (-32%), maths (-28%) and science (28%) – though again, with these core subjects having seen the most dramatic rises in recruitment between 2020 and 2025, it's perhaps understandable if these figures seem especially pronounced.

Regional variations

Perhaps to no one's great surprise, London and the South East both continue to see the most recruitment activity compared to other regions, with new recruits predominantly joining schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged students.

An important caveat to all this, though, is that this year's SchoolDash review has been published slightly earlier than usual, making it harder to draw direct-on-year comparisons – something its authors plan to correct with an update to the figures that will be issued in June.

For now, the full 'Teacher Recruitment and Retention in 2025' report can be downloaded via **tinyurl.com/ts144-TR1**.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recruiting and retaining teachers in shortage subjects remains a growing challenge for secondary schools, but by approaching the task strategically, it is possible to maintain curriculum integrity without relying too heavily on supply staff.

Successful recruitment starts with understanding your school-wide needs, leveraging your internal talent as much as possible and building a flexible workforce. Developing existing staff, supporting alternative routes into teaching (such as apprenticeships and industry professionals), and making flexible working arrangements available to staff are all strategies that can help fill vacancies effectively, and in a timely fashion.

Retaining staff is, however, equally important, and will entail careful consideration of workload management, career development opportunities and the role everyone can play in building a positive school culture.

Schools can and should additionally embrace more innovative solutions to the issue of staff shortages. These might include putting in place team teaching arrangements, and/or dedicating time and resources to recruiting internationally, while at the same time proactively networking and promoting their unique strengths in order to better attract candidates.

By fostering workplaces in which teachers feel genuinely valued and supported, school leaders can build resilient teams capable of delivering high-quality education for students. Recruitment is no longer just about simply filling gaps, and hasn't been for some time – it's about sustaining excellence in the long term.

"We must see recruitment as an ongoing process, rather than a reactive exercise"

only for them to leave after a year?

To retain our staff, we've focused on ensuring that staff workload is manageable by reducing unnecessary marking policies, streamlining data collection and introducing wellbeing initiatives to protect staff from burnout.

Teachers also need to see a future for themselves in your school. Providing pathways for professional growth – such as leadership opportunities and funded training courses – has been key for us in being able to maintain an appropriately motivated workforce.

Finally, staff are more likely to stay in environments where they feel valued and supported. Simple gestures – such as acknowledging achievements, fostering a strong sense of community and listening to staff feedback – can make a huge difference.

Beyond traditional roles

Sometimes, when filling vacancies we need to think outside the box. Faced with a persistent shortage of computing teachers, we opted to hire an industry professional with a background in coding, and provided them with in-school teacher training. This hybrid model ensured that our students received high-quality subject knowledge, while also developing a teacher from within our own school community.

Another approach we've used is team teaching. Instead of relying on a single teacher for a subject, we've created collaborative teaching models where multiple teachers share responsibility for lesson planning and delivery. This has been particularly effective in MFL, where finding full-time teachers can be especially challenging.

The role of leadership

As school leaders, we must see recruitment as an ongoing process, rather than a reactive exercise. Proactive recruitment means constantly networking and engaging with potential candidates before we even have a vacancy, and ensuring our schools are places where people want to work.

A key part of this is telling our school's story. Why should a teacher choose our school over another? What makes us different? We've found that sharing success stories, promoting our culture and highlighting our commitment to professional development through social media and networking events has significantly improved our recruitment outcomes.

Recruiting and retaining teachers in shortage subjects will always be a challenge, but through adopting a strategic approach, it's possible to fill vacancies without compromising on quality. By investing in our existing staff, exploring alternative routes into teaching and fostering a culture where teachers want to stay, we can build resilient teams that provide students with the stability and expertise they deserve.

The challenges of recruitment have certainly increased, but then so too have the opportunities for innovating. As leaders, our task isn't to just fill positions, but to create schools in which great teachers are able to thrive. And when we get it right, the rewards are immeasurable.

Anthony David is an executive headteacher

The road to INCLUSION

AI may help us realise the long-held dream of truly inclusive and effective education for all pupils – but policymakers will need to have a few words with Ofsted first, says **Meena Wood**...

Among some of the profession's most knowledgeable, distinguished voices, there's been much talk of AI in education and Ofsted's report cards – and also of the need for an inclusive curriculum specifically designed for neurodivergent learners.

It seems, however, that in England, at least, policymakers haven't grasped an obvious detail that's staring them in the face: namely, how can we develop an inclusive curriculum without first giving sufficient thought to how we value and assess learners' outcomes?

Destined to fail

The very process of normative assessment has always meant that children and young people end up being compared to their peers – thus frequently leaving behind those students who are among the most vulnerable, those who happen to be neurodivergent and others unable to access the curriculum, owing to a range of literacy and language needs.

The tragic truth of it is that this grouping will always be destined to fail, year on year, constituting the one third who presently don't attain GCSEs in English and maths.

Earlier this year, however, Ofsted announced that during inspections, "*Inspectors will look at how well providers support vulnerable and disadvantaged children and learners, including those with SEND, making sure these children are always at the centre of inspection.*" (see tiny.cc/ts144-S1).

This rhetoric is laudable, and in fairness to Ofsted, disadvantaged children and students with SEND have consistently been a focus for the regulator, in one way or another, in every iteration of the education inspection framework since 2010. 15 years on, Ofsted has now created a separate judgement for 'inclusion' – but is simultaneously still inspecting the same old curriculum model and assessment processes that it was before.

Smoke and mirrors

At this point, we should note the strident critiques voiced from across the teaching sector and portions of the media regarding Ofsted's much-vaunted 'report cards', and how inspectors will henceforth be issuing five separate gradings across 11 judgements.

Up to now, however, this has been a largely tangential 'smoke and mirrors' debate, buoyed by anyone with a vested interest in perpetuating (or indeed opposing) the 'league table' approach to judging schools.

The real problem actually persists with those children who are disenfranchised by the mainstream curriculum – leaving school in droves, being given fixed term exclusions, and who are simply unable to access the curriculum. Without relevant accreditation, they can't achieve the incremental steps needed to progress to the next stage of their learning journeys.

Einstein's purported observation that '*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results*' neatly sums up Ofsted's 'report card' and inclusion judgement plans. If there's no change in what children actually learn and how they're actually being assessed – and still no synergy between DfE and Ofsted on assessment that might better reflect learners' starting points – then a third of students will just continue to fail.

The view from abroad

For simpler, and more pragmatic ways of evaluating schools, we can turn to other countries. Across education systems as disparate as those in Wales, Germany, Singapore and Taiwan, we see the presentation of narratives that highlight schools' differing contexts and learner profiles, alongside attempts at identifying what facilitates certain behaviours and attitudes towards learning.

To this, we could then add the effects of pastoral care, combined with the impact of the curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment on outcomes for *all* pupil groups, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND.

As discussed in my contribution to the recently published book *Beyond*

Belief, we can also take into consideration the impact of leadership, governance and safeguarding on rates of school improvement and overall outcomes.

Unfettered by colour card judgement descriptors, inspectors and schools wouldn't have to tie themselves in knots. Instead, inspectors would use their own expertise and experience to evaluate the quality of the school they're visiting, identifying any barriers to progress and issuing practical recommendations for the next steps the school ought to take.

A truly inclusive model might look at ipsative assessment, which would measure progress from each individual learner's own starting point. Some might argue that this would lower standards, since it's not a comparative outcome – and yet, there's world-renowned curriculum, with no accredited outcome, that has students ready for the next phase of their education at the age of 16, having acquired knowledge across a suite of interdisciplinary subjects.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) ensures that children and young people acquire reasoning, problem solving and critical thinking skills, and can then apply these to enquiry-based project work and learning assignments. These are skills widely recognised as being necessary for further training, employment and increasingly for simply *living*, in a global world where AI technologies are fast becoming commonplace.

The IB sees teachers making effective use of formative assessment – with the aid of AI, in some cases – to provide feedback and adapt students' future learning. The concept of the 'zone of proximal development' additionally encourages better understanding of how learners can secure progress over time.

> **"If there's no change in what students learn and how they're assessed, a third will continue to fail"**

Schools using the ManageBac learning platform can additionally allow learners and parents to view the progress being made in real time, with teachers able to consult charts and other visual tools to monitor students' development and award them a best-fit grade. Under such a system, there are no summative percentages or weightings; teachers' professional judgement is key.

A two-tier system

Meanwhile, the absence of any reference to AI tools in Ofsted's EIF seems like a glaring omission, and at odds with the government's commitment earlier this year to making more extensive use of AI within education. Even before that, the government announced in 2024 its plans for a £3 million 'content store' designed to train AI models on English teaching standards, guidelines and lesson plans, so that it might eventually mark and tailor work to students' individual needs in line with the curriculum of the day.

We may therefore yet see the large-scale adoption of genuinely inclusive, adaptive teaching – though it's worth noting that general purpose generative AIs tools that have trained on data from across the wider internet – such as ChatGPT – can still struggle to generate context-relevant content, and are prone to making factual errors (popularly termed 'hallucinations'). Without any general consensus on the long-term future of curriculum design from the DfE and Ofsted, however, just how relevant can we expect these tools to be in the long term?

The government's own research on parent and pupil attitudes towards AI in education found that "*Parents want teachers to use generative AI so they have more time helping individual children in lessons*". Further research by the online safety campaign group Internet Matters conducted in 2024 found that over half of children regularly use AI tools to help with, or even complete their school work, with two thirds of parents having not been informed about how their child's school plans to use generative AI tools for teaching purposes.

Without set policies, relevant safeguards and appropriate training for teachers and children in place, how will parents, schools and even Ofsted itself be able to tell when work submitted by children is their own or AI generated?

Is the Ofsted 'report card' an adequate tool for capturing these nuances in learning and teaching? Once in use, will inspectors even know what questions to ask of teachers? Will schools and trusts able to afford AI resources for their staff and students 'achieve' better outcomes, and thus more positive Ofsted judgements than those that can't?

Such scenarios risk creating a two-tier education system overseen by flawed Ofsted inspections completely out of kilter with prevailing curriculum, assessment and AI trends. Unless the DfE and Ofsted develop a joined-up approach to creating an inclusive education system – one in which SEND children are at the very centre of inspection – then the process of judging inclusion and achievement for all pupil groups could become little more than a mere tick box exercise reliant on pupil data.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Meena Wood is a former principal and HMI, and author of *Secondary Curriculum Transformed - Enabling All to Achieve* (Routledge, £24.99)

ASK THE EXPERT

Plan a stress-free sports tour

Jamie Anthony, Head of Sales at Edwin Doran Sports Tours, shares his expertise on planning a seamless sports tour for schools

What is the first step in planning a stress-free sports tour?

The first step is to clearly define your objectives. Prioritise what you want to achieve, including the sports to be played, the strength of your teams and the type of challenge you want for them. The desired outcomes for students are essential, and the overall experience you aim to provide. At Edwin Doran, we help Group Leaders with defining clear goals, so they can make informed decisions and keep tour plans on track.

How important is flexibility in planning a sports tour?

Flexibility is crucial. Being open to different destinations and options can lead to discovering the best fit for your group. We ask that you communicate your non-negotiables – such as budget, sports, and travel dates – so we can best tailor your tour and provide several options for you to consider. Weighing the pros and cons with your school's colleagues will ensure you choose the best package that meets your needs.

Why is early planning essential for a successful tour?

Starting early is key to a well-organised tour. Begin your administrative tasks as soon as possible so that everything falls into place smoothly. Gather necessary information, seek approvals from senior leadership and involve your colleagues in the planning process. Early planning helps secure the best airfares, accommodation and fixtures, making the tour more enjoyable and less stressful.

EXPERT PROFILE

NAME:
Jamie Anthony

JOB TITLE:
Head of Sales, Edwin Doran Sports Tours

AREA OF EXPERTISE:
Sports tours and school partnerships

BEST PART OF MY JOB:
Hearing from schools about the life-changing sporting and cultural experiences we provided

How can schools manage the costs of a sports tour effectively?

Calculating the costs accurately is vital. Consider all potential expenses, including airfare, accommodation, meals, transport and excursions. As Edwin Doran has been organising tours for over 50 years, our team can help guide key considerations such as the costs of visas, tipping and security deposits. Having a clear budget and a contingency fund helps avoid financial surprises. Collaborate with your tour operator to get the best value for money and ensure a smooth financial plan.

What role does the tour operator play in ensuring a tour's success?

The tour operator is your key partner. They should understand your team's needs and provide well-matched fixtures. At Edwin Doran Sports Tours, we pride ourselves on building a strong relationship with schools to ensure we can offer the best possible advice and valuable support. Regular communication and collaboration helps address any issues promptly, and makes the tour experience seamless and more enjoyable for everyone involved.

Up, up and away...

Annabelle Pemberton presents a guide for secondary teachers on how to make that summer trip unforgettable – for all the *right* reasons...

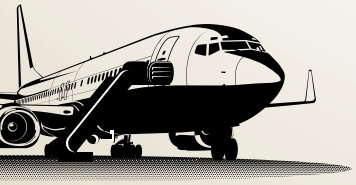
Arranging a school trip can feel daunting, but organising a residential, especially abroad, takes things to another level. And it's all too easy to fixate on what could go wrong.

Having previously organised three international trips – one to Belgium and France, and two to Berlin – I've dealt with my fair share of hurdles. One of the most memorable came last summer when, after months of meticulous planning, we found ourselves sat on a cancelled plane with 60 students. Rather than admit defeat, I scrambled to rearrange the trip for the following October. Despite all the stress, seeing the students finally experience the trip made every challenge worth it.

So, based on what's worked – and the things I'd rather not repeat – here are some key lessons to bear in mind when planning a residential summer trip...

1. Start early, stay organised

Start planning at least 9 to 12 months in advance to secure the best deals and give parents time to budget. Spreadsheets are your friend – use them to track students' details, payment deadlines and risk assessments. Over-communicate with parents and school staff to keep everyone in the loop.



Think about what you want the students to gain. Factor in the costs, accessibility considerations and financial support options to keep things inclusive. Also, check what local events might be coinciding with your visit. During one of our Berlin trips, the city's Festival of Lights gave us bonus activities.

No matter how well you plan, though, things *will* go wrong. Make contingency plans, establish your emergency contacts and set up a staff WhatsApp group. A little preparation goes a long way.

> **"Make contingency plans, establish your emergency contacts and set up a staff WhatsApp group"**

2. Get parental buy-in

Understandably, parents worry. Ease their concerns with a pre-trip meeting, clearly presented itineraries and frequent updates. Payment reminders are essential, and if something should go wrong, communicate quickly.

Support from SLT back at school can be invaluable when managing things on the ground. When our flight was cancelled, our swift communication really paid off. Even before rearranging the trip, I received some moving messages from parents expressing their gratitude, offering words of encouragement and even some flowers and a card. At a point when I felt completely defeated, their support was a poignant reminder of just how much these experiences mean to families, and the power of good relationships.

3. Sort your supervision and safeguarding

Involve teachers who already have relationships with students – think tutors, year leads and subject teachers. Ensure your safeguarding procedures are crystal clear and designate all roles in advance. Allocate staff and students to groups, but ensure that all staff are aware of all students' needs. Hold regular staff briefings and show appreciation for their help.

4. Work with an experienced company

A good tour company can be a lifesaver. One provider gave us expert historians who really helped bring the trip's sites to life. Another supported me in swiftly rearranging everything. A provider's expertise can reduce stress and ensure a much smoother experience.

5. Plan for rooming challenges

There will nearly always be last-minute rooming issues. Early on, gather information as to which students are (and aren't) comfortable sharing with each other, but don't announce room allocations until arrival – and be prepared to make some quick changes once on-site.

6. Encourage Student Responsibility

Set clear behaviour expectations and ensure the students know your itinerary. Creating an interactive booklet with key trip details (student groups, schedules, activities) can keep them engaged and accountable. On one trip, I arranged for five sixth-formers to support us – but remember assistants may need guidance themselves. Let student voice shape the trip, and make them feel valued. When we had three birthdays on one trip, we surprised the students with cake, cards and a disco night.

7. Enjoy It!

For all the stress, *don't forget to enjoy the trip*. Watching students immerse themselves in new experiences is a privilege; for some, it may well be their first trip away from home.

Summer trips are one of the most rewarding things you can do as a teacher. Your students will likely remember it for years to come – and so will you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Annabelle Pemberton is a lead practitioner and history teacher based in South London, serving as KS4 and EDI curriculum lead

Summer school trips

Educate, inspire, amaze and reward your students by exploring these best-in-class destinations

AIRHOP

Looking for a school trip that's active, engaging and fun? AirHop's 27 trampoline and adventure parks across the UK provide a unique environment in which secondary students can boost their fitness, coordination and teamworking skills through physical activity.

From free jumping and games, to structured sessions that promote physical development and collaboration, each visit can be tailored to suit your group's needs. Led by experienced staff in a safe, inclusive setting, AirHop is a valuable extension of the classroom – boosting wellbeing and putting a fresh spin on traditional PE lessons. For more information, visit **airhop.co.uk**

CHESTER ZOO

Treat your students to a rewarding day of summer fun at Chester Zoo. With over 30,000 animals, immersive experiences, and exciting encounters, it's the perfect way to celebrate the end of the school year. Beyond the fun, students will also gain a deeper understanding of wildlife and conservation, making memories while learning about the world's incredible ecosystems. Whether it's exploring the brand new, 22-acre Heart of Africa experience or engaging with our conservation efforts, it's a trip that inspires and educates. To find out more, visit **chesterzoo.org/schools**

WARNER BROS. STUDIO TOUR LONDON

Take your pupils out of the classroom and into the filmmaking home of the Harry Potter™ film series. Inspire them at Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter as they learn how their favourite subjects could lead to a career in the creative industries.

A visit to the studio tour includes:

- A free 45-minute lesson with qualified teachers
- Free teacher planning visit tickets
- Free teacher tickets (allocation-based)
- Free carer tickets for students with EHCPs or equivalent
- A free green screen broomstick experience digital photo

Call the school booking team to arrange your visit on **0800 640 4750**, or find out more at **wbstudiotour.co.uk/schools**

ROYAL ALBERT HALL

The Royal Albert Hall's annual schools music competition, Future Makers, is here to find tomorrow's music talent. Acts aged 14-19 from all across the UK will perform original music in front of a panel of judges and an enthusiastic crowd of KS2 and KS3 students for the chance to win a year of music support. This high-energy show will get your classes cheering as they experience the thrill of live music at the Royal Albert Hall, and tickets are just £3 per pupil. Plus, add a pre-show 30-minute tour of the Royal Albert Hall for an additional £3 per person. A specially written resource pack, containing lesson plans and top tips from the stars will be available to support the trip. Book now at **royalalberthall.com**

PAULTONS PARK

Paultons Park is one of the UK's top-rated venues, and fast becoming a favourite destination for secondary school trips. Boasting 70 thrilling rides and attractions, free parking and flexible booking terms, it has plenty to occupy older students, who will love the short queue times – which averaged less than 15 minutes for school groups in July 2024. Teachers will appreciate the 'pay after' policy, which means schools can book their entire year group, safe in the knowledge that they will only pay for tickets actually used. To find out more, call **023 8081 4442**, email **education@paultons.co.uk** or visit **paultonspark.co.uk**

DUNFIELD HOUSE

Dunfield House, located in Kington, Herefordshire, is an ideal group accommodation centre for schools. Set in 15 acres of beautiful private gardens, parkland and woodland, it offers excellent facilities for educational groups. The centre provides fully catered options that can be tailored to suit your students' needs, accommodating up to 101 guests. Offering a variety of on-site activities – including an indoor heated pool, games room, and outdoor sports areas – Dunfield House ensures a memorable experience. Its supportive staff can assist with programme planning and activity facilitation, making it a perfect choice for school trips and educational retreats. For more details, contact **01544 230 563**, email **info@dunfieldhouse.org.uk** or visit **dunfieldhouse.org.uk**

7 TOP SCHOOL TRIPS

Looking for more inspiration ahead of your next school trip? Then download the latest issue of our sister title, *Top School Trips*. Therein, you'll find advice on how to plan the perfect geography field trip, the reasons why planetariums are perfectly suited to educational visits – and for the more bold among you, a convincing case for why art and design teachers shouldn't shy away from the valuable lessons and insights students can get from exhibitions and retrospectives of controversial works and artists.

Elsewhere, there's advice on making the most of whatever green space you might have in or around your school's premises; a guide to what an 'inclusive school trip' ought to mean in practice – and an argument for why, in some cases, schools might want to rethink the idea of trying to plan and execute a school trip entirely in-house...

Download the full PDF of *Top School Trips* Issue 6 via **tiny.cc/ts144-TST**

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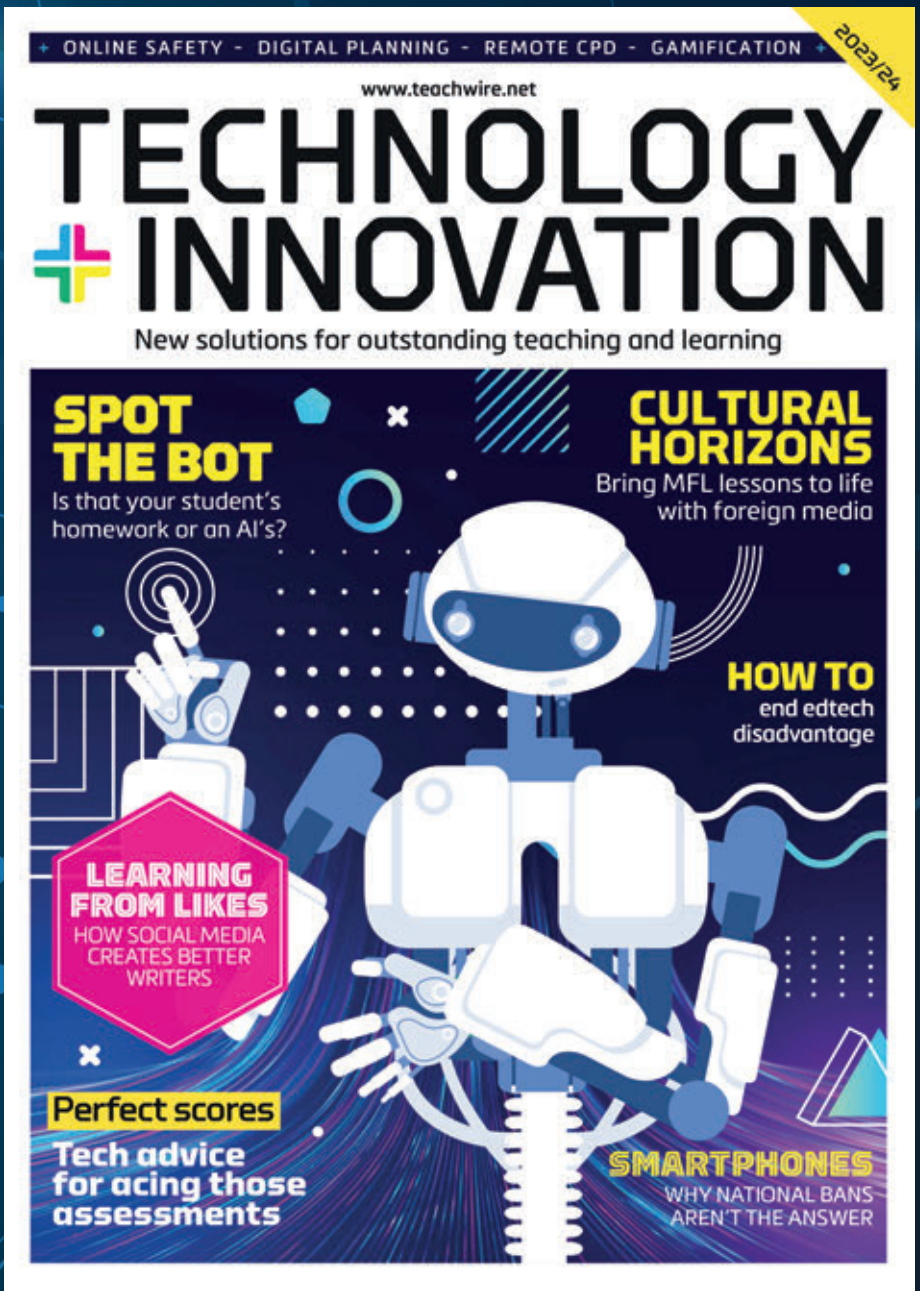


How are the latest developments in technology affecting your students' learning?

How might your school's safeguarding, data protection and procurement strategies be improved?

These are the questions we seek to explore in **Technology & Innovation** – a specialist publication by TeachCo aimed at teachers and school leaders working across secondary schools and academies.

Scan me

Inside this issue...

- **How to tell** if that homework was completed by a student or an AI
- Why addressing digital inequality should be a priority
- What the Online Safety Act means for your students' internet use
- The age of the digitally-taken GCSE is upon us – but are we ready for it?

FOCUS ON: EDTECH

We hear how perusing the modern media landscape now calls for a very specific set of skills; the essential cybersecurity knowledge no student should be without – and why schools ought to be putting those AI guardrails in place sooner rather than later...

What should schools be doing to prepare students for succeeding in today's – and indeed, tomorrow's – digital landscape?

THE AGENDA:

Don't believe THE HYPE

Professor Victoria Baines shares her thoughts on the vital role that teaching critical thinking skills can play in helping students confront online misinformation

Professor Victoria Baines is a cybersecurity specialist, having begun her career as an intelligence analyst for Surrey Police before going on to work at the Serious Organised Crime Agency (now the NCA) and the European Police Agency.

She has also worked for Facebook as its Trust & Safety Manager for EMEA, and is currently Gresham IT Livery Company Professor of Information Technology at Gresham College.

What should be the starting point for teachers when educating students about online harms?

More than most, I've seen how people can fall for scams, and be persuaded and manipulated. I read classics at university, which may seem quite 'elitist' – but it taught me *how to deconstruct other people's arguments*.

The Romans and Greeks helped define what we now call rhetoric – the power of persuasion. We see it everywhere in the modern world – in advertising, but also in cybercrime and fake news, where rhetoric is deployed as a form of social engineering. These efforts may be carried out by hostile governments that want to affect election outcomes, for instance, or certain groups and individuals that want to change how we think.

Effective rhetoric appeals to our sense of logic, our emotions, our personal ethics, or all three at once. It governs how manifestos are laid out. It's at the heart of every political speech you've ever heard. It's no coincidence that some of our most high profile politicians have been classicists trained in precisely that kind of rhetorical expertise.

Is it now easier or harder to protect young people from online harms compared to previous decades?

In over 20 years of working in online safety, one thing I've seen that's quite heartening is how extraordinarily resilient kids can be – but we do have to let them actually develop that resilience in the first place.

In recent discussions around online policy, and legal developments like the Online Safety Act, there's been a drive towards removing all forms of harmful online content from children as much as possible, since their brains are still developing – and that's absolutely right and proper.

However, that shouldn't go as far as removing *all* forms of risky experiences from children. When teaching a child how to ride a bike, for example, you wouldn't demand that they never ride on the road because doing so 'wouldn't be safe'. If children never encounter situations where they must exercise their own judgement, weigh up risk or navigate potential conflicts, we could end up with a generation of 'unsavvy' adults who are ill-equipped to ever do so.

One major change we've seen in recent years is the growing importance of influencers. When I was a teenager, the main trusted sources of information were newspapers and TV news bulletins. People are now increasingly getting news that's mediated through a variety of influencers and personalities – some of whom may know what they're talking about, and some of whom may not.

> **"We need people who can critically evaluate what they're being shown"**

Something else that's changed is how content is now routinely consumed. Short-form media can be great – at its best, it's highly engaging – but what it can't do is give viewers a nuanced or balanced appreciation of a given issue. 15- to 17-year-olds are perfectly capable of reaching an in-depth understanding of topics like the conflict in Gaza – but they won't necessarily get it from short-form content.

Is it possible to maintain spaces with perhaps a mild degree of risk that children can learn from, without putting them directly in harm's way – like the online equivalent to a children's playground, say, or the sports pitch?

Facebook's terms of service have always set its minimum user age as 13, and the same goes for all other US-run companies under the terms of the COPPA legislation (Child Online Protection and Privacy Act) passed by the United States Congress.

However, since GDPR came into force across the EU – and in the UK, since we were prior signatories – countries have been able to set those age limits differently, should they wish. That's led to some countries opting to set social media age limits at 16, unless younger users can obtain parental consent. Though policing that is a whole other matter.

Some platforms have also experimented with running dedicated channels for children, such as YouTube Kids – but questions remain as to how the content on those channels should be monitored. Is it the responsibility of parents, or should that be down to the platform holders?

Can crowd-sourced solutions, like X's 'Community Notes' feature, play a role in those considerations?
The inevitable response to that is '*At what point do you moderate a piece of content?*'

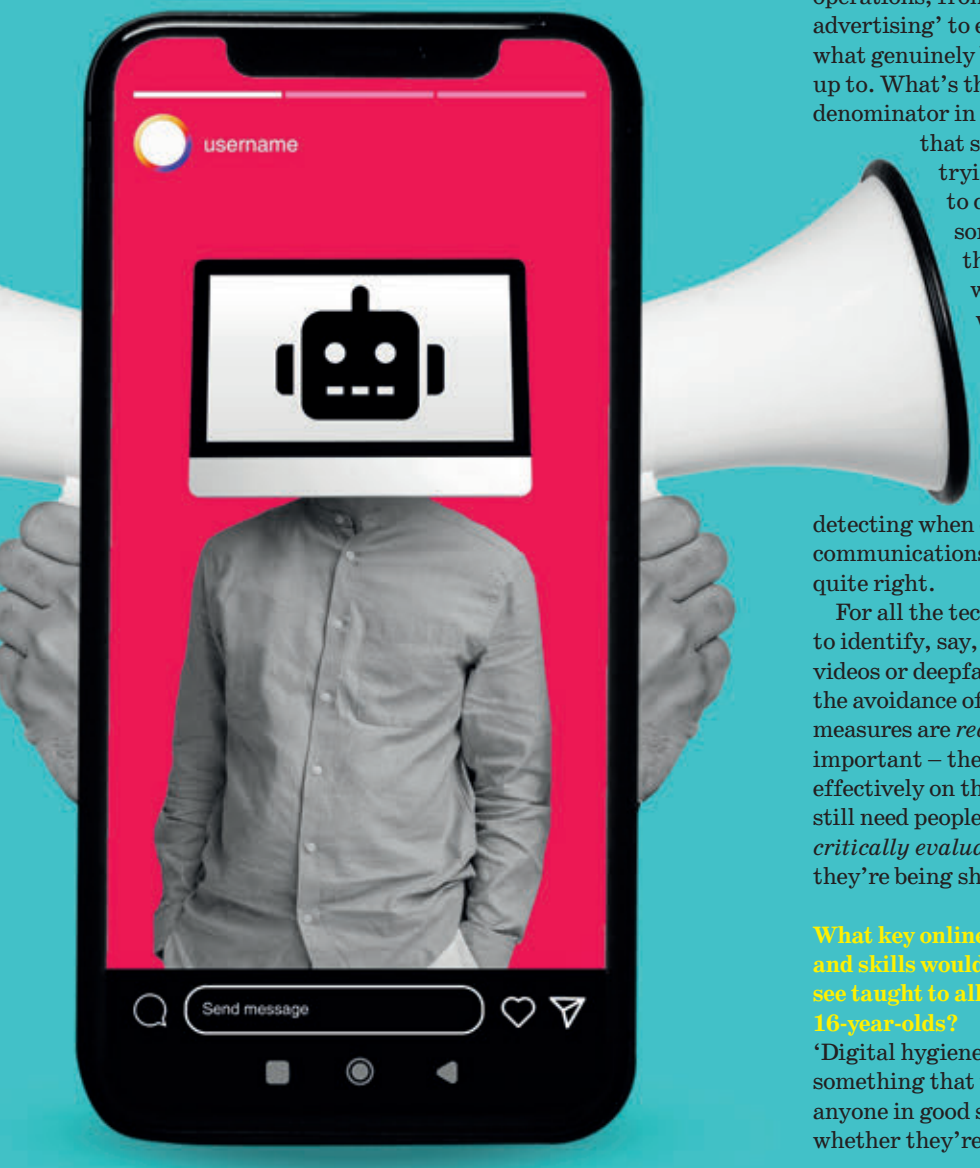
Malicious community reporting is certainly possible, by organising enough people to state that a given post is factually incorrect. You still need a system that runs things, an algorithm of some kind deciding at what point a piece of content should be marked as potentially contentious.

But such solutions won't work when people on the platforms in question already have polarised or extreme positions. Community Notes and similar measures can only be effective when people are willing to accept differing points of view.

What balance should schools strike between educating students about the online content they're accessing now, and the online experiences they can expect to have in early adulthood?
Schools already have some input into child protection and general internet safety efforts – '*Don't speak to strangers online*', and so on. I see far less emphasis on the importance of critical thinking, which I feel is a missed opportunity. Critical thinking can protect you from cybercrime and cybersecurity incidents, because when we get down to it, both are built on attempts at persuading people to take some form of action.

I first learned about bias and propaganda while studying Nazi Germany at school. Right now, there's a fantastic opportunity for us to move beyond the mid-20th century context and ask students what those same systems and processes might look like now. Because I think you'll get some interesting answers.

Some may conclude that influencers use similar strategies to promote certain consumer brands. They'll see that there's a whole spectrum of influence operations, from 'legitimate advertising' to exposés of what genuinely bad guys are up to. What's the common denominator in all this? It's that somebody is trying to get you to do something, or think a certain way. That's why critical thinking is so important – it helps develop that 'Spidey Sense' for detecting when content and communications don't feel quite right.



For all the tech we can use to identify, say, manipulated videos or deepfakes – and for the avoidance of doubt, those measures are *really* important – they can't work effectively on their own. We still need people who can *critically evaluate* what they're being shown.

What key online knowledge and skills would you like to see taught to all 16-year-olds?
'Digital hygiene' is something that will stand anyone in good stead, whether they're 16 or 76. That includes all the obvious things – like observing good password security habits and the like – but it's also about about taking just a second or two whenever you see something in a post, email, video or game which gives you pause.

That can be difficult. Technology moves fast, with people consuming and producing content at a rapid rate – but it's a form of mindfulness that can make you feel better, while also saving you from a great deal of bother.

Students should be encouraged to regularly consider '*What am I looking at here? Why have I got this? Why am I seeing this?*'

We should want young people to be less, '*Hey, there's this thing I need to react to right now*' and more, '*Hey, there's this thing*

A CRITICAL APPROACH

"Approaching online material critically will often involve asking a series of questions similar to those I'd use when working as an intelligence analyst:

- Who's doing this?
- Why are they opting to present the material in this particular way?
- What's in it for them by doing so?

Social media channels will usually have a specific reason for presenting something to you – be it '*Buy my latest merch*', or '*I want you to think 'this' way, so that you will take this action.*' Taking a moment to actively consider '*Why does somebody want me to think this, or do that?*' is what will ultimately save humanity from the robots."

Come face to face with nature

Chester Zoo

Reward your students with a fantastic day of discovery and exploration at Chester Zoo. With over 30,000 animals, immersive experiences, and unforgettable moments, it's the perfect way to celebrate the end of the school year while inspiring a love for nature and conservation.

New for 2025

Heart of Africa is a 22-acre experience where students can see giraffes, zebras, and ostriches in a vibrant, mixed savannah. This new part of the zoo brings African ecosystems to life, giving students valuable insights into global conservation efforts.

Plan your school's adventure today

The rules of the road

Tasha Henstock sets out five ways in which schools can ensure students navigate online spaces safely, both in school and at home

Whether young pupils are engaging in social media, playing online games or just browsing websites, safeguarding them against inappropriate content is crucial for preserving their wellbeing in both their online and physical lives.

With research showing that nearly half (48%) of British teenagers feel they're addicted to social media, it's more important than ever that parents and teachers take proactive steps in guiding children towards healthier online habits.

As a qualified designated safeguarding lead and mental health first aider, I've worked closely with the Internet Watch Foundation and the Counter Terrorism Intelligence Unit on ensuring that students are able to stay safe and secure in an increasingly digital world.

Drawing from those experiences of protecting UK schoolchildren from accessing harmful content in the classroom, then, here would be my five key tips for helping to keep kids safe online:

1. Prioritise communication

Creating an open dialogue with students about their online activities is crucial for ensuring their safety. Encouraging honest discussions around internet usage will help students feel more comfortable about sharing their online experiences, both good and bad. Educators can then gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' online behaviour and identify any potential risks.

Asking open-ended questions – such as '*What's your least favourite website and why?*' can help to uncover students' specific digital habits and concerns.

2. Leverage security tools

Antivirus software from providers like Norton and Trend Micro will help block access to dangerous websites, preventing personal details from falling into the hands of hackers. The UK's four main internet providers – BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin Media – all provide their customers with free parental controls that can be activated at any time, complete with useful video guides to help users download and configure the controls they offer.

Many school networks also include a URL blocking facility, thus enabling you to erect a comprehensive shield against inappropriate content. The process may vary depending on your network provider, but will typically involve changing router settings to restrict access to certain web domains. Schools should regularly liaise with their IT administrators to configure these settings in the first instance, and then update them as needed.

3. Managed app access

Via the options screen of your preferred mobile platform, students can be prevented from accessing potentially harmful apps. On iOS devices, apps can be locked through Screen Time settings.

It's important to be aware of what apps students are using and how they engage with them. By setting up authentication requirements for app installations on school devices, educators and administrators can control which apps students are able to access, and therefore prevent exposure to potentially harmful content.

Exploring the games and apps students use will make it easier to identify potential risks, such as chat functions that might expose students to unknown individuals, while also fostering important conversations around digital literacy and what responsible online behaviour looks like.

4. Establish clear tech usage rules

Establishing clear rules and boundaries regarding device usage in classrooms can have a transformative effect on student engagement and digital wellbeing. By specifying when and where devices like tablets or laptops can be used, teachers can encourage more mindful tech usage. Setting expectations around technology will also help students develop healthier long-term digital habits both at school and when at home.

Exposure to screen time is something that both students and teachers should carefully consider. iOS devices, for instance, let users set specific screen time limits and manage the periods when devices can be used. It's also worth recommending tools like the Amazon Parent Dashboard (see parents.amazon.co.uk) and the iOS Control Centre to parents, so that they can help further regulate the time their children spend on digital devices at home.

5. Educate on online risks

Open up discussions around the dangers of oversharing, the importance of safeguarding personal data and how to recognise online threats. Organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation (iwf.org.uk) and the UK Safer Internet Centre (saferinternet.org.uk) offer a range of helpful and educational resources for schools and educators.

Teaching students the importance of not sharing personal data over the internet is fundamental. By discouraging oversharing, and warning them of common 'traps' that hackers can use to steal personal information and worse, you can help them broaden their awareness and stay safe online.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Tasha Henstock is software product manager at RM Technology

Bringing AI TO HEEL

The benefits of AI for teachers will only be fully realised once schools have put appropriate regulations and safeguards in place, says **Kirsty Treherne**...

Earlier this year, as part of its AI action plan, the government pledged £1m in funding support for 16 edtech companies currently developing AI tools for use in education. Though modest in comparison with broader AI initiatives in other sectors, it was a clear indication that the government is committed to integrating AI into the work being performed by the nation's schools.

The government has claimed that AI will guarantee that, "*Every child and young person, regardless of their background, can achieve at school*" while enabling teachers to, "*focus on what they do best: teaching.*"

AI's huge potential when utilised for educational purposes may seem undeniable, but its increasing adoption raises some important questions. What can AI realistically do to support teachers, and where does it fall short? Which AI-driven tools are genuinely useful in an education context, and which should be approached with caution – especially when placed in students' hands? And crucially – how should AI be regulated so that it enhances, rather than undermines the teaching and learning experience?

AI's strengths

Even prior to the government's investment plans, we've already seen how AI tools are enhancing a education in a host of different ways. One of the most promising applications is in formative assessment and feedback. Research has shown that while high quality feedback significantly boosts student performance, teachers often struggle with the time-consuming nature of marking. AI tools, however, can cut the time teachers spend on formative assessment by up to 50%, enabling them to spend more time on teaching and engaging with students directly.

Marking aside, online platforms such as Canva Magic Studio and MagicSchool are allowing teachers to quickly create interactive lessons and appealing instructional materials. Right now, many teachers are successfully using AI to support their lesson and curriculum planning, complete administrative tasks and create lesson activities. In tandem with other technologies – such as text-to-speech and speech recognition software – AI's visual recognition functions can also be used to make lessons more inclusive, and help students with SEND access materials that might have otherwise been unavailable to them.

AI's ability to personalise learning can additionally help to keep students engaged by tailoring content to their individual learning needs and progress – though this doesn't mean that teachers should rely on it to create entire lessons from start to finish. Instead, we've learned that it can be used to support and speed up the kind of everyday processes that keep many teachers working far beyond the hours they're paid for. The automation of labour-intensive tasks can free up teachers' time, but it's just as important to always maintain teacher oversight and judgement of the processes being undertaken by AI.

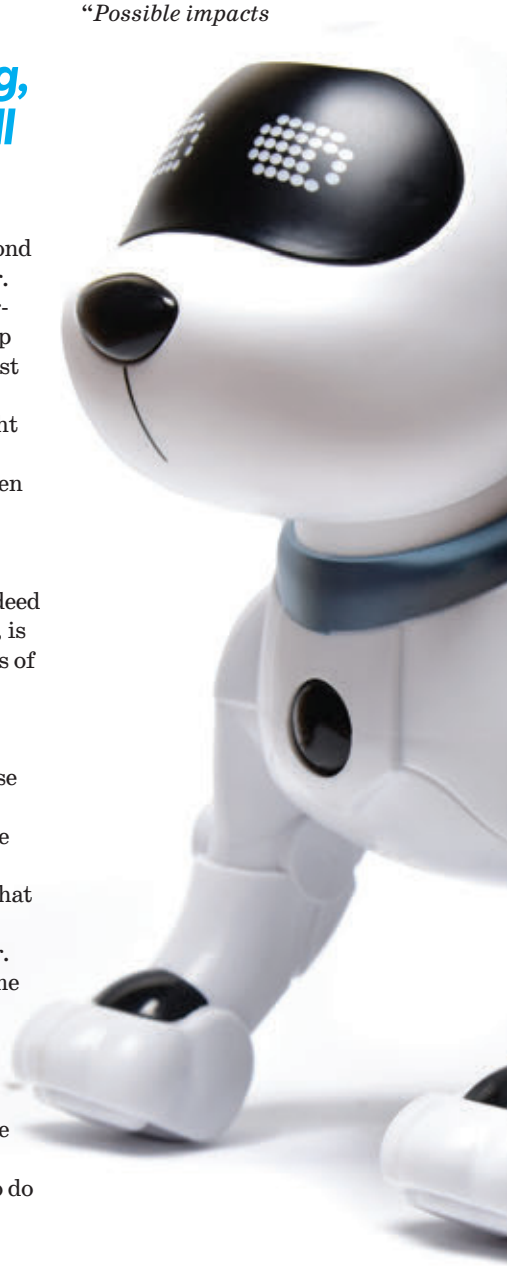
> **"Social and emotional development, critical thinking, interpersonal skills – these all require human interaction"**

The human element

What AI cannot – and indeed *should* not – do, however, is replace the human aspects of teaching. Social and emotional development, critical thinking, interpersonal skills – these all require real human interaction. If AI tools are used without careful oversight, there's a risk that teacher-student relationships could suffer.

The DfE has shared some further concerns of its own regarding the propensity for some AI platforms to serve users misinformation, and some students' growing over-reliance on AI software to do their thinking and responding for them. The ultimate goal is to encourage responsible and regulated use of AI technologies in ways that support teaching, rather than replace traditional methods.

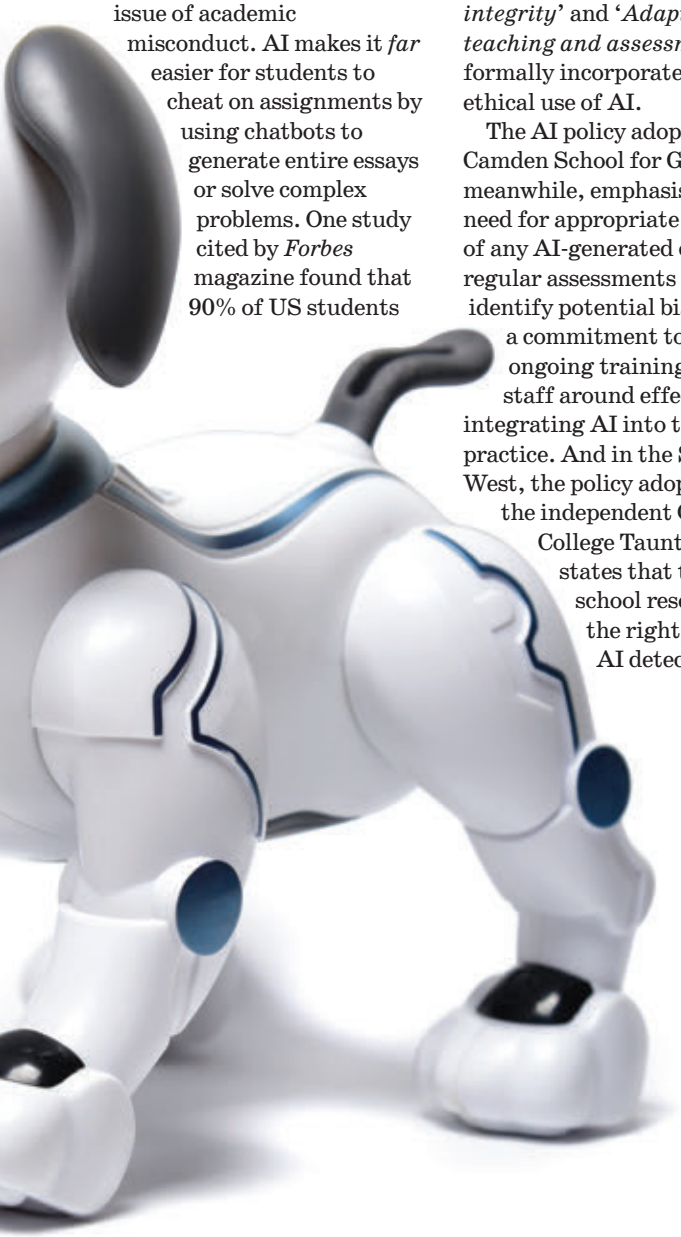
As such, we cannot ignore the accompanying risks. The government has urged schools to consider AI's "*Possible impacts*



on learning, the importance of the teacher-learner relationship and the risks of bias and misinformation." In many ways, students are becoming test subjects for a technology, the long-term implications of which still remain uncertain.

The impact of AI on children's learning and development is fast becoming a growing cause for concern. One US teacher quoted in the *New York Times*, described how their students were becoming overly reliant on AI for brainstorming and writing tasks, warning that they're, "*Losing the ability to think critically, and overcome frustration with tasks that don't come easily.*"

There's also, of course, the issue of academic misconduct. AI makes it *far* easier for students to cheat on assignments by using chatbots to generate entire essays or solve complex problems. One study cited by *Forbes* magazine found that 90% of US students are already making regular use of ChatGPT to complete homework assignments. For this reason, it's vital that schools implement software to detect plagiarism, and adopt strategies aimed at preserving students' problem-solving skills.



Context-specific policies

With a broader regulatory framework yet to emerge, some institutions have opted to introduce tailored AI policies of their own, which is a trend we can expect to see more of.

The Russell Group, for instance, has developed '5 AI principles for university education', which include '*Promoting AI literacy*', '*Upholding academic integrity*' and '*Adapting teaching and assessment*' to formally incorporate the ethical use of AI.

The AI policy adopted by Camden School for Girls, meanwhile, emphasises the need for appropriate citation of any AI-generated content, regular assessments to identify potential biases and a commitment to ongoing training for staff around effectively integrating AI into their practice. And in the South West, the policy adopted by the independent Queen's College Taunton states that the school reserves the right to use AI detection tools to discern machine-generated work from that produced by students.

Striking the balance

Regulatory elements that other schools and colleges should consider including in their own policies might include:

- Conducting risk assessments to identify potential AI misuse and mitigation strategies
- Defining appropriate uses of AI for teachers and students, including subject- or year group-specific sub-policies
- Ensuring that all AI tools used within the school are overseen by appropriate safety, filtering and monitoring features
- Reviewing homework policies to address AI-generated content and establish clear guidelines on ethical AI use
- Encouraging students to critically evaluate AI-generated outputs, with teachers providing oversight on suitable AI usage in research and learning activities
- 'AI literacy' professional development for teachers to ensure effective integration of software

AI has the potential to transform education, but its success will depend on how schools regulate and integrate it. Used wisely, it could reduce workloads and enhance learning – but without proper oversight, it risks undermining the learning of critical thinking skills and academic integrity.

While some schools are taking the lead in setting AI policies, there's a pressing need for clearer national guidelines. The challenge now is to strike the right balance so that AI's benefits can be embraced, while at the same time safeguarding the fundamental role of teachers in shaping students' learning and development.

INDUSTRY REGULATION

While the UK government has stated that "*Schools and colleges are free to make their own choices about AI tools*", it has also emphasised that they must comply with existing statutory obligations, such as the 'Keeping children safe in education' guidance.

As AI adoption continues to accelerate, however, we can expect to see clearer and more structured guidelines to emerge, which will likely focus on the following areas:

1. Just as digital literacy has become a standard educational focus, AI literacy will likely be incorporated into school curricula
2. Government guidance may mandate that AI-generated content be clearly identified, similar to how schools currently require proper citation of sources
3. The sharing of sector-wide best practice on responsible use of AI in assessment, which may potentially include the mandatory adoption of AI detection tools
4. Tighter controls on how AI-powered tools store and share data
5. A further strengthening of existing safeguarding measures, including restrictions on AI use among younger students

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kirsty Treherne is a former headteacher and education lead at the school safety management platform iAM Compliant; for more information, visit iamcompliant.com

The case against PEDAGOGY

If we want to make a real difference with our teaching and learning, we have to look beyond time-efficient, impersonal pedagogy, says **Aaron Swan**...

What pedagogical initiatives are you *required* to use as part of your teaching and learning? Do you need to provide pre-written lesson plans? Must they include starter activities, mini plenaries?

How about whole class feedback? Regular interleaved recall and testing? Taxonomical questioning? Predefined learning objectives written on the board and in books? Scaffolded sentence starters? Seating plans grouped by SEN, target grade or attainment grade?

At one time or another, these will all have been presented to teachers as somehow integral to improving teaching and learning. The thinking often goes that layering them up must then improve teaching and learning yet further, since the more pedagogy there is, the better – right?

Thus, we attend courses to reinforce the pedagogy, undertake NPQs to qualify in the pedagogy, are given an observation rubric with which to appraise the pedagogy and so on...

Leaps and bounds

I found myself recently calling to mind two directly incompatible experiences from my professional career. The first came during an NPQ session, where we were being shown a video of pedagogy in practice. I watched as a teacher marched around a classroom while the (primary) students worked in silence. In her hand, the teacher held a clipboard displaying the names of the students and attended to them in a particular order. Quickly scanning their pieces of work, she placed a dot against an area of focus, before then moving to the next student. Throughout, no words were exchanged.

The second experience is a vivid memory I have of a student who became extremely angry with the quality of their work, and concluded that it couldn't be completed. When I approached the student, I was met with a "***You** might as well write it*" – because to them, that was the only way in which anything good could come of the activity.

Though reluctant at first, I finally told the student that I'd write their work for them – and then promptly sat and listened as thoughts and ideas came spilling from the student like spaghetti from a saucepan. I tidied up their words into better phrasing, using only their ideas, and there it was – a sensibly laid-out essay.

The change in tone was immediate. I'd been willing to sit and help the student, and listen to and support them. Naturally, this took up a significant portion of the lesson, during which no other student had my attention. It was pretty much just me and this individual student for 15 to 20 minutes.

Afterwards, the student never needed me in quite the same way again, and subsequently came on in leaps and bounds in terms of their confidence over the remainder of that year. Their pride in how they fared producing each new essay was astonishing and joyous for us both.

> **"A desirable cognitive end state depends on the relationships we have with the people around us"**

Cognitive blockages

Whenever I've seen education coming to mean something important to a student, it will typically have been after myself or a colleague have sat with them and listened to them.

I've talked to students who have told me about a family bereavement, argument or sense of abandonment. I've spoken to students who have revealed to me their gender, their personality, their hopes. I've heard students riddled with self-loathing and a lack of self-esteem loudly doubt themselves.

This type of interaction is often described as a 'student-centred approach', rooted in the pioneering work of American psychologist, Carl Rogers, in the 1960s. The underlying principle is that growth only occurs when people experience feelings of being valued; can deal with

the things they feel are important; and can resolve the issues that are on their mind. Rogers devised a new client-led approach to therapy that viewed these personal issues as a kind of 'cognitive blockage' that psychotherapists could only uncover through the client leading the conversation. The therapist's role was to listen and encourage.

Rogers' work on client-centred therapy has since been adapted and adopted by teaching circles as the 'humanistic approach'. Not far removed from Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the humanistic approach states that self-actualisation can only be reached when lower level psychological needs are met first – think food, safety and security, love, a sense of belonging and self-esteem.

Autonomy, mastery and purpose

One of the biggest motivators of success I've seen first-hand is the 'queue jump ticket' – a reward for students that enables them to skip the line for food at lunchtimes. It sometimes seems as though even the most basic of Maslow's needs isn't yet met for many schoolchildren – an observation supported by the government's own statistics pertaining to below average income households.

In his book *Drive: the Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, author Daniel Pink argues that traditional, reward-based motivation doesn't get to the heart of the human condition. Instead, he maintains, people are motivated to a far greater degree by autonomy, mastery and purpose over cash (or equivalent) incentives.

And yet, many of the pedagogical strategies I regularly see actually *remove* students' autonomy, based on the premise that highly directed and controlled teaching and learning environments eventually lead to mastery. And these pedagogies, alas, leave very little room for space in which an adult can help a student discover their purpose, ambition and inspirations.

60 seconds to sympathise

The theories underpinning the humanistic approach suggest that a desirable cognitive end state depends, at least in part, on the relationships we have with the people around us – relationships that emphasise listening, meeting important human needs and the discovery of one's own purpose.

But how can we forge those relationships as one teacher before a class of 30 students? A one-hour lesson gives us two minutes per child, assuming that the entire lesson will be given over to relationship building – but let's be more realistic and call it one minute.

That's 60 seconds to listen. Or 60 seconds to sympathise. Or 60 seconds in which to foster safety, love, self esteem and inspiration.

Rather than promoting one-to-one engagement that can speak to the needs of individuals, we instead often have to focus on the shared needs of the group. We exchange the significant benefit of providing therapy that every individual student needs, with the mutual minor benefit of knowledge and understanding.

A misleading bet

Pedagogy attempts to turn small gains into large wins by co-opting those large classroom numbers. After all, if 30 students can each make small gains, then that's surely better than just one lone student making a significant gain?

But the numbers don't stack up. Those small gains – made through significant planning and scaffolding of cognitive strategies, such as fast-paced, closed answer recall, mini plenaries and so forth – are so hard won, and so easily lost, that they make for a misleading bet. It's a slot machine that accrues small wins easily, but loses everything to the banker before any big jackpots can be cashed.

The pedagogy I'm most concerned about are those strategies that decrease the emotional connections between teacher and learner, and reduce the human contact that students receive from mature, compassionate adults. Strategies that make us too 'busy' and time-pressed to get to know one another as humans.

What I want to see is pedagogy that *increases* the contact we have together. I want to know how to give 30 individuals 20 minutes of time each lesson. For we humanist teachers, the numbers may well be against us, but we should be driven by giving time to individuals. Which is something that can't always be said of existing pedagogy.

WHAT I DO

The one pedagogy I've developed for myself and try to follow where I can is as follows:

1. I give myself 10 minutes to teach a concept and model it. If I can't teach it and demonstrate it in that time, then it's too complicated.
2. Students then get 20 minutes to collaborate on a shared challenge to recreate the model.
3. After this, they have a further 20 minutes to work independently on creating it for themselves.
4. During these 40 minutes, I won't be at the board or sat at my desk, but sitting with the students, asking them how they are. We'll talk about the work, or we might talk about them. Because when students are heard, they're happier. And when they're happier, surprising moments of progress can be made.

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

Q&A

"The impact can be transformative"

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

30 SECOND BRIEFING

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

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

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

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

FORDINGBRIDGE
inspiring design + build

Contact:
01243 554 455 | fordingbridge.co.uk | info@fordingbridge.co.uk

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

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

ABOUT STEPHEN: Stephen Toone is the Managing Director of Fordingbridge

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

What's the difference?

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

What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

1 Expand your offer

Given growing demand for flexible sixth form options, and increasing pressure on staffing and resources, many schools are seeking innovative ways of expanding their A Level provision.

Here at Academy21, schools are partnering with us to support students needing alternative pathways – including those with medical needs or EHCPs – and expand their sixth form subject offerings, such as politics, psychology and further maths. We can also provide high quality, flexible A Level learning, with expert guidance

Academy21 offers inclusive KS5 provision via our sister school, King's InterHigh. Whether your students require alternative subjects, a flexible schedule or remote education, we can deliver engaging, fully supported learning to help them succeed. Discover how we can support your sixth form provision and KS5 students by visiting **academy21.co.uk**

2 Whatever the weather

If you're looking to enhance your school's outdoor spaces, but are tight on budget or time, Fordingbridge's new range of off-the-shelf canopies offer a smart and speedy solution.

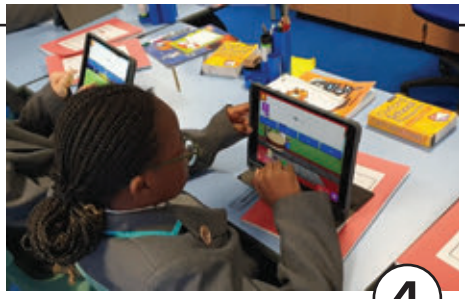
Choose from two pre-designed timber structure types, and you can have your new canopy in place within just eight weeks. The 'timber canopy' type (2-6m) is ideal for covered walkways and outdoor learning spaces. The 'hexagonal structure' type (6m, 8m or 10m in diameter) are well-suited to outdoor social and learning spaces.

Best of all? Both shelter types offer the same quality finish and industry-leading warranties found on Fordingbridge's other structures. Find out more about Fordingbridge's off-the-shelf structures by visiting **fordingbridge.co.uk**

3 Growing aspirations

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

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



4 Maths needs met

Sumdog is a games-based educational tool designed to support students of all abilities in mastering mathematics. By offering engaging, curriculum-aligned practice, it helps enhance fluency and strengthen essential skills. Questions are personalised to each learner's individual level, boosting confidence and empowering every young person to succeed.

Sumdog fosters an environment in which maths is accessible and enjoyable for all, interventions are supported and learners' diverse needs are fully met. If you're looking for a way to bridge the gap between primary and secondary school, Sumdog serves as a valuable catch-up resource for KS3 students by reinforcing KS2 concepts in a fun and interactive manner. For more information, visit **play.sumdog.com**

5 Recruit the best

Finding new teaching talent for your school can be time-consuming and costly – especially when you want to focus on giving your pupils the great education they deserve.

Teach First recruits dedicated, diverse teachers for you. We work hard to select high-quality trainee teachers and match the right trainee to your school. Our trainees will be classroom-ready when they join you, and with our Ofsted-rated Outstanding training, we can ensure they develop lifelong classroom skills, and that your pupils will thrive as a result. To find a talented teacher for your school, visit **teachfirst.org.uk/teacher-recruitment**

Things left UNSAID

Jennifer Hampton considers the profession's continuing lack of knowledge regarding dyslexia – and whether a new consensus-built definition might change things for the better...

In early March 2025, Jamie Oliver – the well-known television chef who, 20 years prior, had got the nation rethinking school dinners – visited Parliament to attend an event entitled 'We Need To Talk About Dyslexia', hosted by the MP for Broxtowe, Juliet Campbell.

Oliver is currently campaigning for improved dyslexia provision in the country's schools, highlighting the harmful impact on self-esteem and confidence when the needs of young people with dyslexia aren't addressed. But with the geopolitical and economic implications of Donald Trump's second presidential term generating multiple headlines daily, there hasn't been a slow news day for a fair while.

That may partly explain why we haven't seen Jamie's star power draw attention to this issue as powerfully as his previous campaign against Turkey Twizzlers. Though we might equally wonder why his focus seems to have shifted so much from the kitchen to the classroom...

Why don't we talk about it?

As an English teacher and mother to a child with dyslexia, I'm personally rooting for Jamie, and hope that a Channel 4 documentary he's currently working on will shine a much-needed light on the everyday experiences of children and young people who experience difficulties with reading and writing. A light that will hopefully show how many of these students experience little more than the receipt of a plastic coloured overlay by way of support; that will uncover the lack of dyslexia knowledge and dialogue amongst the teaching community; and highlight the widely varying experiences of children and young people.

Politicians are keen on telling us that SEND funding for schools has increased – yet a closer look reveals that the number of SEND students in schools has also increased, meaning that spending per child is, in fact, *lower* than it was in previous years. There simply isn't enough money. We all know that.

If we're to meaningfully talk about dyslexia and properly support those young people affected by it, then we educators need to first confidently understand what it actually *is*. I'd been an English teacher for over 15 years, and had completed an MA with a focus on reading when I found myself having to engage with dyslexia in a much more personal way. I thought I knew enough. It turned out I didn't.

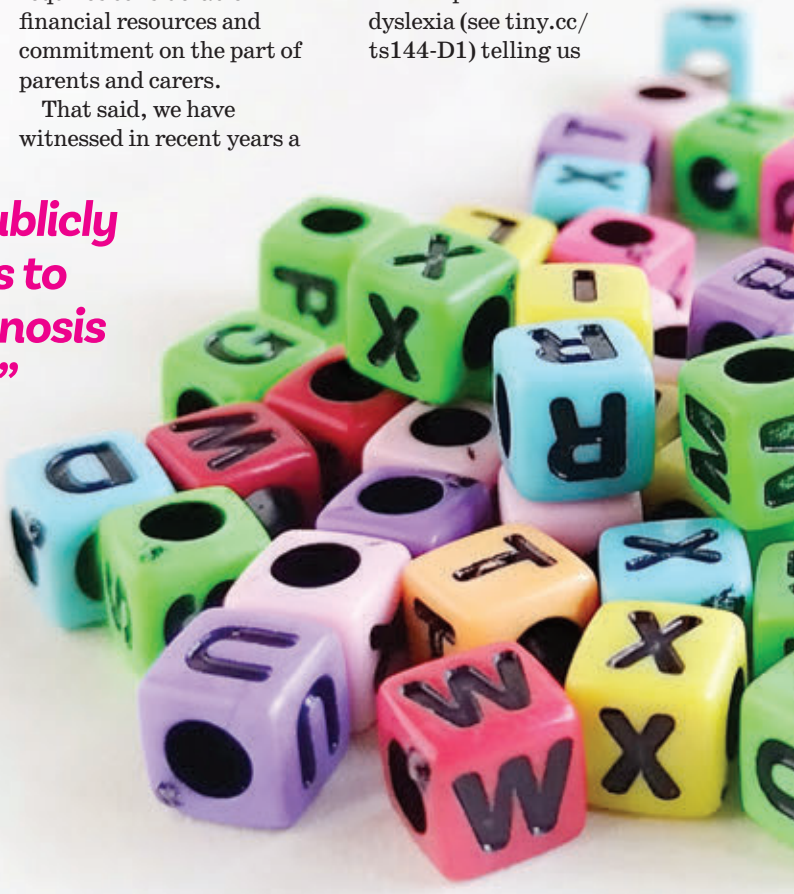
Since the first identification of dyslexia over a century ago, there's been much debate over how to define it, with the lack of consensus between academics and researchers at times impeding the work of policymakers. A key point of contention in this debate has concerned the value of a dyslexia diagnosis, though historically, said debate hasn't always included the voices of young people themselves and their parents (though this is changing).

Defining dyslexia

At the present time, there are *no* publicly funded routes to securing a diagnosis of dyslexia. It remains an expensive process that requires considerable financial resources and commitment on the part of parents and carers.

That said, we have witnessed in recent years a heightened awareness of issues around neurodiversity, following dramatic rises in rates of autism and ADHD diagnoses among children and adults alike. Dyslexia is similarly a neurodevelopmental condition, and while there's been some informed, compassionate dialogue on social media among people sharing their stories and specialist teachers suggesting strategies (it really can be an excellent resource), I'm not sure that a constructive dialogue around dyslexia has reached secondary school settings, as is the case for autism and ADHD. This, despite the new Delphi definition of dyslexia (see tiny.cc/ts144-D1) telling us

"There are no publicly funded routes to securing a diagnosis of dyslexia"



that dyslexia can frequently occur alongside other developmental conditions.

The 2024 Dyslexia Delphi Study, authored by academics from leading UK universities, sought to agree on a new definition of dyslexia by building consensus amongst numerous dyslexia experts, specialist teachers, educational psychologists and individuals with dyslexia. This newly developed definition is the one you'll now find at the British Dyslexia Association's website at bdadyslexia.org.uk, and while it won't have any retrospective bearing on past diagnoses, it does set out to dispel historical confusion, while addressing misconceptions around dyslexia and its links to visual stress and increased creativity.

Against a backdrop of multiple ongoing challenges in education – the continued underperformance of groups from certain socioeconomic backgrounds; ethnicity and gender inequalities; the continuing impact of the COVID-era school closures; the ever-deepening recruitment and retention crisis – the lack of professional discussion around dyslexia is deeply concerning.

An invisible difficulty

We know about the young people arriving at secondary unequipped with the literacy skills needed to engage with the curriculum. We know about the students who have struggled to secure key passport GCSEs in maths and English.

A recent study by researchers at Nottingham Trent University into the visibility of dyslexia across schools in England (see tiny.cc/ts144-D2) interviewed a number of families and teachers. The study's explorations uncovered a significant number of students who felt anxious, stressed and excluded from learning. Based on the research, and our own professional observations, we know that young people with dyslexia can be left exhausted through the continuous effort of trying to meet literacy expectations across a range of subjects.

At the time of writing, Jamie Oliver's 'Documentary of hope' is set to air later this year. In the meantime, we've seen the recently published Curriculum and Assessment's Review Interim report (see tinyurl.com/ts143-TP2) acknowledge that too many students aren't meeting expected standards at the end of KS2 and KS4 – particularly those with SEND and who are socio-economically disadvantaged. The full report is scheduled to be published at some point later in the year.

Via The Dyslexia Delphi study, we do now at least have a definition of dyslexia that's been reached by consensus, which certainly wasn't the case previously. A cursory look at any news outlet will remind you that we live in turbulent times – and yet, I can't help feeling optimistic that we may now, finally, see a more wide-ranging dialogue in schools around how we can ensure students with dyslexia are able to succeed.

My own child's dyslexia hasn't yet been formally diagnosed as yet, but it's been highly visible right throughout her education. The problem is that there's too much variability across the system. Every student must be able to keep learning, but then so too do their peers, and all the other key stakeholders around them. So who knows – maybe a little media-driven star power might help to move the process along.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Jennifer Hampton (@brightonteacher) is an English teacher, literacy lead and former SLE (literacy)

THE DELPHI DEFINITION

- Dyslexia is a set of processing difficulties that affect the acquisition of reading and spelling. Some, or all aspects of literacy attainment will be weak in relation to the individual's age, standard teaching and instruction, and level of other attainments
- Across all languages, the key markers of dyslexia difficulties are reading fluency and spelling ability. These are on a continuum, and can be experienced to various degrees of severity
- The nature and developmental trajectory of dyslexia depends on a range of multiple genetic and environmental influences
- Dyslexia can affect the acquisition of other skills, such as mathematics, reading comprehension or learning another language
- The most commonly observed cognitive impairment in dyslexia is a difficulty in phonological processing (i.e. phonological awareness, phonological processing speed or phonological memory) – though phonological difficulties alone don't fully explain the variability that's often observed
- Effects on working memory, processing speed and orthographic skills can contribute to the impact of dyslexia on a student's outcomes
- Dyslexia can frequently co-occur with one or more other developmental difficulties, including developmental language disorder, dyscalculia, ADHD and developmental coordination disorder

For more information about dyslexia and the 'Delphi' definition, visit bdadyslexia.org.uk

[MATHS PROBLEM]

STANDARD FORM WITH NUMBERS LESS THAN 1

Students often get confused when putting numbers less than 1 into standard form, says Colin Foster

In this lesson, students discover how to be confident when converting numbers of less than 1 into standard form.

THE DIFFICULTY

Which of the numbers below are equal to 0.0071?

71×10^{-4} 71×10^{-3} 71×10^{-2}

7.1×10^{-4} 7.1×10^{-3} 7.1×10^{-2}

0.71×10^{-4} 0.71×10^{-3} 0.71×10^{-2}

*Which number is 0.0071 in **standard form**?*

The three numbers on the leading diagonal (71×10^{-4}, 7.1×10^{-3} and 0.71×10^{-2}) are all equal to 0.0071, and, of those, 7.1×10^{-3} is expressed in standard form, because the first factor (7.1) is greater than 1 and less than 10.

Students are often very unsure about this kind of thing, so if they can't confidently do this yet, then that is the purpose of the lesson.

10^2s	10^1s	10^0s	10^{-1}s	10^{-2}s	10^{-3}s	10^{-4}s	10^{-5}s
7	1	0					
	7	1					
		7	1				
		0	7	1			
		0	0	7	1		
		0	0	0	7	1	
		0	0	0	0	7	1

THE SOLUTION

Look at the chart below.

The left column shows the hundreds. Why is it labelled '10^2s'?
Because the second power of 10, which is 10^2, is equal to 100.

How would you read the other column headings?
Tens, ones, tenths, hundredths, thousandths, ten-thousandths and hundred-thousandths. Students might need reminding that 10^0 is equal to 1, and not zero. 10^0 has to be equal to 1 in order to fit the pattern.

What pattern is there as you move to the right?
Each time we move one column to the right, we divide by 10. This is reflected in the indices reducing by 1 each time.

Practise reading the numbers aloud in more than one way on each row. For example, the first row is '710 ones' or '7.1 hundreds' or '7100 tenths', etc. The last row could be read as '0.71 thousandths', or '0.0071 tenths', etc.

Students find this very difficult at first, but with practice they become confident at reading the same number in multiple different ways. After a while, they will see that wherever the 1s digit comes in the number that we say will give us the column that we are referring to. For example, in the first row, the number 71 has its 1s digit in the 10^1 column – so we would say '71 tens'.

It's worth spending time on this, because once students can do this, writing numbers in power-of-ten notation is easy. For example, '7.1 thousandths' becomes 7.1×10^{-3}.

Checking for understanding

Make up a question like the one we started with, using digits of your own choice, and with 10^{-1}, 10^{-2} and 10^{-3} as the different powers of 10. See if your partner can answer it.

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

You are not an IMPOSTER

If you're not feeling up to the task of being a teacher, and perhaps even believe you've no right to wield such a huge responsibility, then you're not alone, says **Colin Foster**...

People frequently enter teaching with the highest of ideals. They want to make a difference. They recognise that young people have only one chance of getting a school education, and that doing well in school can considerably improve a young person's life chances.

If this is the lofty motivation for being a teacher, then it follows that teachers can find themselves labouring under a huge amount of pressure and expectations to transform lives. Given all that, who *wouldn't* harbour at least the occasional doubt about being equal to the demands of such a monumental task?

Understanding imposter syndrome

It's therefore hardly surprising that teachers will often experience some flavour of 'imposter syndrome' – a term referring to a collection of beliefs centred around issues of self-doubt. It's the voice inside a teacher's head, telling them, '*Who do you think you are? What business do* ***you*** *have being a teacher? Soon enough, everyone will discover that you're a fraud!*'

Similarly, it shouldn't be surprising to learn that there are some well-established links between imposter syndrome and depression, anxiety and burnout (see tiny.cc/ts144-IS1).

Imposter syndrome (or, to use the more neutral term, 'imposter phenomenon') tends to be associated with high-achieving people, having first been observed among successful women and other marginalised groups. If your experiences of getting into teaching involved some degree of struggle, in which you had to to fight to get people to take you seriously as a professional, the cumulative effects of that can be long-lasting doubts around whether your critics maybe had a point all along.

If you came to the profession from a background where few of your relatives and peers went to university, where the tendency was to view teachers as very much the 'other', rather than 'us', then becoming a teacher yourself may feel strange at times; almost as though you're 'someone else', rather than yourself.

"Those with imposter syndrome strive to become professional superheroes, always attempting to work longer, harder and better"

The fear of being found out

Feelings of imposter syndrome are most likely to surface in already stressful situations – which, of course, teaching provides no shortage of. Perhaps you've made a mistake in the classroom, or during a meeting with colleagues. Maybe a student's challenged you (possibly for reasons more to do with their own life than anything about you). Regardless, you may respond by taking the situation personally, and seeing it as one more piece of evidence that you should *never have allowed yourself to believe that you could do this job*...

A common feature of imposter syndrome is over-generalising even tiny mistakes, by perceiving these as evidence of a general lack of ability – catastrophising that you never get things right and are always failing, even when that's manifestly not the case.

The perennial fear of imposter syndrome is the notion of 'being found out'. The person susceptible to imposter syndrome will live each day trying to hide their belief that they shouldn't be doing the job that they're doing, while constantly waiting for everyone else to discover this 'truth' for themselves.

This can in turn lead to unhealthy attempts at overcompensating, resulting in work martyrdom, where one's work-life balance is sacrificed on the altar of 'doing right by students and my colleagues'.

Those with imposter syndrome strive to become professional superheroes, always attempting to work longer, harder and better than those around them. They're constantly trying to prove themselves to everyone – including themselves – while at the same time living in constant fear of

being exposed as a fraud, regardless of how successful they are, and how much those around them appreciate all that they do.

Even on good days, there's always that familiar feeling: '*I got away with it this time – but what about the next time?*'

Breaking the cycle

Not everyone with imposter syndrome will have exactly the same experience, but one common feature is the constant feeling of being judged and not measuring up. This can lead to a cycle of over-preparation and perfectionism, fear of failure and discounting of successes, leading to yet more over-preparation to try to prove themselves even more thoroughly next time.

Breaking this vicious cycle involves rejecting the notion that a person's worth depends on what others think or say about them. Looking to others to determine our worth is destructive to our wellbeing – especially if we fail to recognise when others have very favourable views of us, and instead focus solely on the negatives.

Teachers come in all shapes and sizes. One teacher's strengths will be completely different from another's. Having a diversity of class and background is particularly valuable within the teaching profession, so that young people get to see positive role models among their teachers who have things in common with them that they can identify with.

Negatives to positives

Telling young people that they can aspire to a range of different futures and professions is important, but actually seeing in reality teachers – and others – who have come from similar backgrounds to their own speaks far more powerfully.

One teacher once told me how her regional accent, which she had been made to feel uncomfortable about at university, became an important asset when she returned to the community she'd grown up in and started teaching at one of the local schools.

She spoke like the young people she taught, and they related to her accordingly. She quickly learned to see this as a positive, rather than a negative for her practice.

That's not to say that all teachers must be able to relate to their pupils in the same way – young people ultimately need to encounter a range of teachers from multiple different backgrounds – but there was certainly no reason for that particular teacher to feel she had anything less to offer than anyone else. Quite the opposite, in fact.

A corrosive perfectionism

The perfectionism of imposter syndrome is like any other form of perfectionism. As well as being corrosive for one's emotional health, it simultaneously prevents people from doing their best work. Letting go of some of that pressure will free us up to be the people that we actually are, with all our strengths – and, yes, our personal challenges too.

Young people can and will quickly see through pretence. They're much more likely to relate well to teachers who have learned to be relaxed with being their true selves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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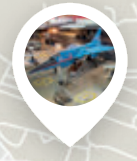



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Risk reduction

Sam Starsmore explains why schools can play a vital role in warning students of the harms around online gambling

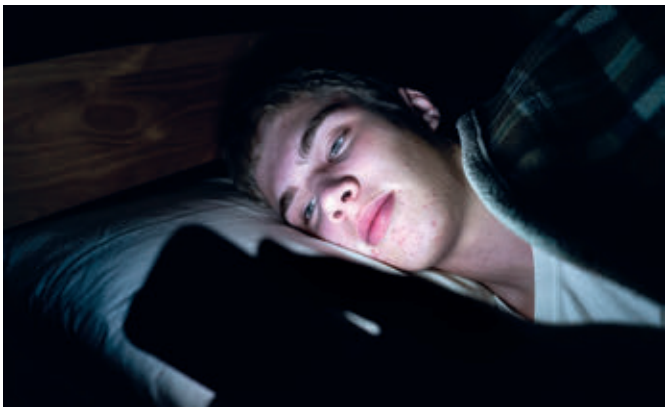
Gambling is no longer limited to casinos and betting shops. It's now deeply embedded in the online world, seamlessly woven into the digital spaces that captivate and consume so much of young people's lives.

In light of this increased exposure to gambling in the digital spaces where students spend their time, however, secondary teachers are in a powerful position to safeguard students from gambling-related harms.

Why early intervention matters

Research shows that young people who gamble before adulthood are at a higher risk of experiencing gambling harms later in life. Education interventions for secondary students can be crucial, given that adolescence is the key period for cognitive, social and emotional development. It's a critical time for encouraging lifelong positive behaviours and attitudes, in a safe and trusted environment.

Secondary students are increasingly exposed to gambling advertisements, and gambling-like features in video games and on social media platforms. Early education helps them to not only recognise these influences, but also develop the tools and knowledge needed to safeguard themselves and others around them. Research shows that school-based interventions can effectively reduce gambling-related harms by increasing awareness and correcting misconceptions, thus preventing the escalation of unhealthy gambling behaviours into adulthood (see tiny.cc/ts144-G1).



Young people are highly influenced by their peers. Using an informed approach, teachers can foster a supportive classroom environment in which healthy relationships and behaviours are both encouraged and affirmed by those around them. This can also equip young people with effective coping strategies and decision-making skills in complex social situations, thus helping them manage stress and avoid turning to gambling as a form of escape.

Social media and influencers

According to the Gambling Commission's '2024 Young People and Gambling Report' (see tiny.cc/ts144-G2), 53% of young people aged 11 to 17 reported seeing gambling advertising online, primarily via social media platforms, where gambling messaging and influencer endorsements have been widespread.

Some of the biggest streamers and influencers in the world – most of them hugely popular with young people – have landed major sponsorship deals with gambling operators. These influencers are often handed 'house money' to gamble with live on stream, before thousands of young viewers, and sometimes lose eye-watering sums in a single session.

These kinds of sponsorships remove the actual risk associated with online gambling, which, combined with the perceived wealth surrounding these individuals, results in gambling being glamourised for young audiences.

Young people will mostly be engaging with this kind of content at home, but teachers can still create an environment in school where it's safe for students to talk openly about their experiences online. So what might a school-based early intervention for gambling harms look like in practice?

Raising awareness

By integrating gambling education into PSHE lessons, teachers can help students understand the risks associated with gambling, including addiction, debt and impacts on mental health.

Developing critical thinking: Lessons that explore probability, randomness and the concept of 'chasing losses' will equip students with the knowledge to understand the risks and mechanics of gambling, helping them make informed choices and recognise how the gambling industry encourages repeated gambling.

Promoting healthy relationships: Teachers can facilitate discussions around home environments, peer pressure and the emotional drivers behind gambling. Exposure to parental gambling can elevate the risk of their children experiencing gambling harms. By helping students develop the confidence to recognise unhealthy influences in their families and friends, they'll be better placed to build resilience, and protect both themselves and those around them.

Addressing emotional regulation: By teaching coping strategies for negative emotions and sensation-seeking, educators can reduce the appeal of gambling as a form of escapism or affirmation.

Digital safeguarding: In a digital world where gambling is increasingly pervasive, teachers can play a crucial role in educating and protecting young people from the risks that threaten their future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Starsmore is education programme lead at Ygam – the UK's leading charity dedicated to preventing gaming and gambling harms among young people. To book a bespoke training session for your school, contact **training@ygam.org**; to book a place on an open session, visit **ygam.org**

LEARNING LAB

IN THIS ISSUE

CONTRIBUTORS

MARK BEVERLEY
Director of the Institute of Teaching and Learning, Sevenoaks School

ROBIN LAUNDER
Behaviour management consultant and speaker

MEL PARKER
Educational Technologist, RM Technology

VIV TRASK-HALL
Head of product and innovation, Thrive

ZEPH BENNETT
PE teacher and school achievement leader

Thinking about ...

TEACHER UNIONS

Another year, another pay dispute. Another round of strike threats. Another letter home. Another rushed SLT meeting about 'contingency plans'. Another weary chat in the staffroom about who's striking and who isn't, who can afford to and who can't, and who thinks whether it will really, *truly* change anything.

Conference season has been and gone, with both the NEU and NASUWT laying out their stalls. The hot topic? Strikes over pay.

Now, before I'm accused of siding with 'the man', let's be clear – teachers absolutely deserve decent pay. What we're currently paid isn't good enough. The unions should be fighting for salaries that reflect the late nights, emotional exhaustion and endless redesigns based on the latest fad from Ofsted, new SLT or – dare I say it – Netflix dramas.

When I asked a former line manager of mine if he was striking in 2023, he said, "*If I weren't to strike, what am I saying about the value of my profession?*" He was absolutely right, and I've since adopted his mantra as my own: *I am not against striking for better pay*. And yet...

Most of us (I hope) didn't become teachers dreaming of mansion houses, butlers and private jets. We joined because we loved the idea of teaching. When we see 40,000 teachers leaving the profession within a year, we have to ask – are they quitting over the money, or over everything else that's broken?

I'm not saying we should be striking over parents slagging us off on WhatsApp, Ofsted's Nando's-esque inspection charts or the reality that genuine career progression usually means less classroom time. But when the dominant narrative that reaches the national press is, '*Teachers are striking again because their third pay rise in three years isn't enough, sneer, sneer...*' you have to wonder if the unions are getting their message across in the right way.

We want more teachers to stay, and more new recruits to join us. We want teachers to love their profession and be proud of it. So why does it feel like we're embracing tactics that are scaring people off? Who in their right mind would sign up for a career that constantly seems to be one bad headline away from being vilified?

Which brings me back to the unions. Striking over pay used to be the nuclear option – a last-ditch shout for dignity and respect. Now, it's become little more than background noise. I've voted in so many strike ballots recently, it's starting to rival my voting for *Strictly Come Dancing*.

I don't think pay is the main reason why teachers are leaving. Why aren't we seeing similar energy spent on fighting for smaller class sizes? More funding for TAs? Holding parents accountable for '*I think you're lying*' responses when ringing home about behaviour issues?

Fighting for better pay *is* essential, yet when we focus solely on pay, we lose a bit of the moral high ground. And a little more public respect. It's not just the money that needs boosting; it's the whole sorry, battered soul of the profession. Shouting louder every year about pay might win the odd battle – but it sure as hell won't win the war.

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

FOCUS ON... MEANING AND PURPOSE

Notions of meaning and purpose are common to several frameworks that seek to describe human wellbeing and flourishing. Our research at Sevenoaks School into flourishing shows that, as students mature in their school lives, there's a decline in notions of meaning, purpose and an associated 'sense of wonder'.

The main reasons for this, as cited by our students, pertain to increasing pressure associated with taking examinations and applying to university. These are seen to stifle reflective practices, engagement with deeper levels of independent thought and creativity. And yet, learning is most meaningful when students are cognitively and behaviourally engaged in it. So what can schools do to counter this trend?

We know that teachers have little time for considering fundamental questions of meaning and purpose, whether in the wider curriculum or in their everyday classes. It's perhaps even more unlikely for us to expect students to do the same. But, with space for individual teachers or groups to consider the elements that make an education actually worth it, we're more likely to generate conditions in which students are motivated, likely to achieve, and in the end, fundamentally happier.

In October 2025, Sevenoaks School's Institute of Teaching & Learning will host the 'Educating for Meaning and Purpose' conference. The topic continues the theme of 'student flourishing' that was the focus of our previous 2023 conference and our ongoing research project with Research Schools International. 'Meaning and purpose' is one of the five flourishing domains identified by the Harvard Human Flourishing Program (see hfh.fas.harvard.edu), with which Sevenoaks School has worked closely with since 2020.

This year's one-day programme is set to include keynote presentations, talks, practical workshops and interactive sessions designed to help students lead more fulfilling educational lives. The day will address questions such as:

- How to integrate purpose-driven learning into standardised curricula
- How can school cultures nurture intellectual curiosity and learning engagement?
- How can AI be used in a meaningful way?
- How can creativity in the classroom be developed?
- How can teaching and learning practices attend to the needs of neurodiverse students?
- How can older students learn through play?

The conference will also address larger issues – such as the principles associated with curriculum content and design – as well as subject- and classroom-focused topics in which meaningful curricula are made real and practicable. We have selected speakers that are experts in a diverse range of subject areas, so that attendees will leave the conference feeling inspired to adopt new practices into their own teaching, having gained some unique insights.

We will also discuss research-informed activities for cultivating meaning and purpose, and encourage teaching staff to consider how different activities could benefit their students – including:

- Self-reflection tasks that ask students to consider personal values and self-goals
- Encouraging students to reflect on these goals and values in relation to others
- Extracurricular experiences that facilitate leadership roles
- Service activities – such as volunteering – that make a positive social contribution

Ultimately, the conference will offer a range of practical strategies for cultivating motivated, achieving and happier students.

MARK BEVERLEY IS DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SEVENOAKS SCHOOL; THE 'EDUCATING FOR MEANING AND PURPOSE' CONFERENCE TAKES PLACE ON 17TH OCTOBER 2025 AT SEVENOAKS SCHOOL, WITH TICKETS AVAILABLE ONLINE NOW AND FREE FOR STATE SCHOOL EDUCATORS – FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT SEVENOAKSSCHOOL.ORG

DO THIS

TREAT MISBEHAVIOUR AS AN OBJECT

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

When you respond to misbehaviour, talk about it as though it were an object. What we don't want to do is this:

"*Jonny, you are so noisy!*"
"*Why do you always chew gum in my lessons, Jane?*"
"*Faisal, you are always late!*"

Instead, we should respond to incidents of misbehaviour in a tone and manner closer to this:

"*Jonny, shouting out in class is distracting.*"
"*Chewing gum in lessons, Jane, is against our school rules.*"
"*It's important to be punctual to your lessons, Faisal.*"

If you *personalise* the misbehaviour, you'll increase the chances of the student in question reacting in a defensive way. If, on the other hand, you treat the misbehaviour *as an object*, it allows the student – and you – to be more objective and dispassionate regarding the matter at hand.

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

£96 million

The total amount spent by schools in England on supply teachers in 2023/24

Source: DfE data cited by Access Education's 'School Budget Crisis Report'

The Social Market Foundation has called on Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson to 'slim down' the GCSE examination process and instruct schools to collect more accurate data on pupil wellbeing.

In a briefing paper titled 'We Used To Have It All' (available via tinyurl.com/ts144-LL8), SMF researchers reject what's become an increasingly widespread view across the profession – that boosting pupil attainment necessarily entails pulling back from efforts aimed at improving pupil wellbeing.

Instead, they point to 2003 as a year in which the UK fared better than average in both maths scores and pupils feeling a sense of belonging at school, compared to other OECD countries in those respective PISA measurements. That's in stark contrast with 2022, by which time UK pupils' sense of belonging had declined more than any other OECD country (though its relative academic improvement did see some gains).

The SMF goes on to highlight the example of Japan, where schools typically offer pupils a diverse curriculum in combination with an extensive programme of extracurricular activities, and how the country attained both the highest increase in PISA's 'belonging' score, while also recording the highest maths score.

The SMF's recommendations thus include recalibrating schools' key focus towards treating pupils' academic performance and general wellbeing with equal importance, while also reducing the volume of high stakes formal assessments pupils are expected to sit.

CLOSE-UP ON...

DIGITAL STANDARDS

The government announced in March a £45 million investment package into school infrastructure as part of its 'No Child Left Behind' strategy, alongside a set of updated Digital and Technology Standards for schools. But as I've found through conversations with teaching staff, there's some uncertainty regarding the latter's purpose. So how should schools be approaching them? And how can they use them in practice?

WHAT DO THE STANDARDS MEAN FOR SCHOOLS?

Schools rely on a diverse array of technologies to provide the best education they can. This includes not just the laptops students use to access the internet, but also the broadband connections that enable that access.The Digital and Technology Standards – first published in 2022 and updated earlier this year – provide guidelines to help schools and colleges use the right digital infrastructure and technology.

Meeting these Standards can help leaders make more informed decisions around the technology used in their schools, leading to safer, more cost-efficient practices and new learning opportunities for their students.

Since the procedures and systems schools need to operate can often be complex, the Standards are mainly intended to describe 'best case scenarios' that everyone can strive for, in areas from cybersecurity to digital accessibility. Before the Standards, there was no single, consistent source describing such scenarios for schools.

The wireless connectivity at a school I was recently working with in the North East, for instance, was so patchy that staff had a complete lack of internet access in some areas. It didn't matter that their hardwired broadband connection was good – it was the wireless coverage that was the issue. The government's Standards gave our team at RM Technology a helpful framework they could use to explain what needed to be fixed and why.

Another area is cybersecurity. Many schools understand how important it is, but lack a framework for standardising and implementing the policies they adopt. The government's Standards – by suggesting that annual security reviews take place, for example – help ensure that all schools understand what 'good' looks like.

HOW CAN THE STANDARDS BE IMPLEMENTED IN PRACTICE?

Arguably, one of the most important Standards is set out under 'Digital leadership and governance' – designating a member of SLT to lead the school's technology strategy. This person can help to ensure the school is doing everything it can to meet the other Standards.

This person needn't necessarily be a 'techie', but they should at least understand how technology can be used from a strategic perspective. They should be thinking about what their school can use to improve its operations and enhance the educational experience. Many schools still use manual processes that could be automated, for example; a designated IT lead would help to initiate this transition.

It's important that schools review the Standards and devise strategies for meeting them – but equally, senior leadership shouldn't worry if they're still some way off this. Rather, they should approach them as markers towards an optimal set-up, showing the best path for creating environments that will enable the best education for all students.

MEL PARKER IS AN EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIST AT RM TECHNOLOGY, ADVISING SCHOOLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EFFECTIVE DIGITAL STRATEGIES, HAVING PREVIOUSLY BEEN A MATHS TEACHER AND DEPUTY HEADTEACHER; FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT RM.COM

1,647

The number of counselling sessions delivered by Childline in response to calls from young people citing exam/revision stress between April 2024 and March 2025

Source: NSPCC

Need to know

The Education Policy Institute has warned of a significant 'workforce quality gap' at schools with the most disadvantaged pupil populations in the country, compared to those with the most affluent.

The EPI's method for gauging the effectiveness of teachers between different schools involved measuring the extent of their experience within the profession; their academic and professional qualifications; and the rates of staff turnover and teacher absence at their respective settings.

From this, the researchers found that teachers and leaders in disadvantaged schools are typically less experienced and less likely to hold a degree relevant to their subject specialism (with STEM subjects showing the starkest gaps), with disadvantaged schools also seeing markedly higher levels of staff turnover and more teacher absences.

The researchers' proposals for tackling said gaps include offering financial retention incentives for experienced subject specialists in disadvantaged schools; expanding professional development opportunities following the model of the National Professional Qualifications; providing more extensive training for school leaders; and adopting more sophisticated methods for measuring the quality of teaching.

Download the full 'Closing the Workforce Quality Gap' report via tinyurl.com/ts144-LL7

WHY TEACHERS SHOULD...

BE CURIOUS, NOT FURIOUS

Earlier this year, the acclaimed Netflix drama *Adolescence* propelled incel culture, misogyny and toxic masculinity firmly into the public consciousness.

Everyone working in secondary classrooms will be familiar with these issues. In fact, they've always existed – but when smartphones and algorithmically controlled social media feeds collided with a divided, fragmented and disconnected society, it created the ideal conditions for these corrosive attitudes to be spread far and wide. And it's adolescent boys who are most affected.

A recent BBC survey (see tiny.cc/ts144-LL2) revealed that more than a third of secondary teachers had reported misogynistic behaviour from pupils at their school. A recent NASUWT poll (see tiny.cc/ts144-LL3) meanwhile found that almost three in five teachers believe that social media use has had a negative effect on behaviour in schools, with self-proclaimed 'misogynist influencer' Andrew Tate specifically cited by a number of respondents.

These harmful attitudes can lead to increased polarisation and misinformation, and reinforce negative behaviours. Young people are especially vulnerable to being isolated, radicalised and disconnected from healthy, respectful ways of engaging with others, due to the changes in the brain and body that occur during adolescence.

Dealing with these topics can be challenging because naturally, we want all the answers right away. However, we must accept this is a society-sized problem, and that the process will take time. It's down to responsible adults across society – parents, carers, educators, community workers and beyond – to commence the process by openly talking to young people about these topics

We've developed a resource containing some useful pointers, based on expert advice from academic and educator. Lewis Wedlock:

- **Be curious, not furious** Approach conversations with authentic interest in young people's experiences and viewpoints. Ask open-ended, exploratory questions without imposing immediate judgement or correction.
- **Use active, reflective listening** Prioritise hearing and understanding over immediate responses. Reflect on what young people share, ensuring they feel heard, valued, and understood.
- **Adopt a non-judgemental stance/presence** Develop trust by avoiding immediate criticism or defensiveness. Validate their feelings and perspectives as genuine expressions of their lived experience, even if they differ from your own views.
- **Model humility and openness to learning** Admit when you don't have all the answers. Model humility and openness by learning alongside young people, demonstrating that it's okay – and essential – to grow and change your views.
- **Support critical thinking and encouragement** Gently prompt young people to reflect critically on the information they consume. Support them to ask questions about sources, motivations and potential biases.
- **Recognise the emotional context** Identify and sensitively engage with underlying emotions such as fear, insecurity or desires for acceptance, which often drive beliefs or behaviours.
- **Establish patient boundaries** Establish respectful communication norms, clearly stating that derogatory or harmful language isn't acceptable, while remaining patient and flexible enough to revisit difficult topics when necessary.
- **Get comfortable with the uncomfortable** Recognise that these conversations may cause discomfort or resistance. Stay calm, provide space and allow conversations to unfold naturally, knowing that trust deepens over time.

VIV TRASK-HALL IS HEAD OF PRODUCT AND INNOVATION AT THRIVE, WHICH TRAINS TEACHERS AND OTHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S WELLBEING; THRIVE'S NEW RESOURCE, 'FROM RED PILL TO 80/20', IS AVAILABLE NOW VIA TINYURL.COM/TS144-LL1

Under the radar *Attendance policies*

A new study from the National Foundation for Educational Research has indicated that schools would be better off prioritising individualised approaches to tacking pupil absence over school-wide sanctions, such as detentions, fines and phonecalls home.

As detailed in 'Voices from the Classroom - Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence' (see tinyurl.com/ts144-LL4), pupils value being able to talk to trusted members of staff when returning from absence. The team conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews and focus groups with staff and pupils across nine state-funded secondary schools from November to December 2024, and found that staff recognise the importance of tailoring attendance support to pupils' individual needs, while acknowledging the workload involved in doing so.

Some participants described how their schools offer rewards, including prize draws and trips, as motivators for good attendance. Pupils attending schools that recognise good attendance alongside the provision of pastoral support felt more motivated to come to school. Conversely, pupils at schools that prioritise imposing sanctions for pupil absence are more likely to perceive attendance policies as unfair – especially when absences are down to reasons outside of their control.

Illness, mental health challenges and term-time holidays were found to be the most common causes for pupil absence among the participating schools, with missed lessons during absence emerging as a major source of anxiety for pupils.

For their part, staff cited limited support from external agencies, such as CAMHS, as being responsible for putting extra pressure on already stretched school teams, and believed that more consistent support from said agencies would help them better manage pupil needs, address the root causes of absence and ultimately improve attendance.

TRENDING

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

ANIMAL WELFARE

The RSPCA has teamed up with Speakers for Schools to offer a free 'Virtual Work Experience' event for 14- to 19-year-olds. Taking place from 23-25 June, the event will see speakers from across the RSPCA deliver a series of interactive workshops on topics ranging from 'The Role Of An RSPCA Inspector' to 'Jobs In Science At The RSPCA (Animal Sentience)'. Sign up via **tinyurl.com/ts144-LL5**

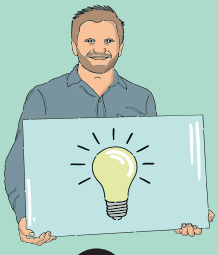
STEM CAREERS KNOW-HOW

EngineeringUK has produced a free resource for careers leaders containing advice on how to present the engineering and technology sector as an engaging and accessible career option. The seven-page 'Advancing STEM careers provision in schools' highlights a wide range of career opportunities and potential talking points, alongside details of various external organisations able to offer further suggestions and support. Download the guide via **tinyurl.com/ts144-LL6**

TEACHER WALKTHROUGH

5 WAYS TO REVIEW PRIOR LEARNING

ZEPH BENNETT HIGHLIGHTS SOME EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR REVISITING CRUCIAL LESSON CONTENT



1

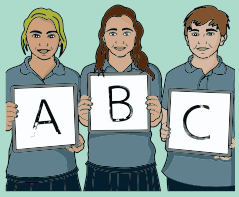
SOLVE FAMILIAR PROBLEMS

Questions aimed at reviewing prior learning don't have to be completely different each time; use problem sets comprising questions similar to previous lesson questions, so that students can recall similar answers to the same problems

2

PAIR SHARE

Ask students to review their previous learning with their shoulder partner, using the 'Think, Pair, Share' method to engage retrieval and summarise key points from the last lesson



3

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Use low stakes multiple choice questioning to identify any misconceptions and encourage student participation; try using mini whiteboards as part of an all-class questioning activity

4

WRITE A PARAGRAPH

Activate prior learning in students by getting them to write a paragraph about what they can remember from the previous lesson; students can then share their paragraphs with each other, or display them via the visualiser for some live teacher feedback

5

QUIZZING

Interactive quizzing from the likes of Kahoot can provide a fun and engaging way of reviewing previous learning in a low stakes, yet effective manner – useful for teachers when checking for understanding and pinpointing knowledge gaps

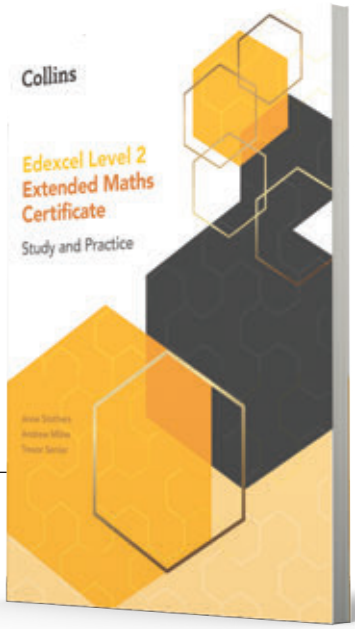
ZEPH BENNETT IS A PE TEACHER AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT LEADER WITH 25 YEARS' TEACHING EXPERIENCE; YOU CAN FIND MORE OF HIS EDUCATIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY FOLLOWING @ZEPHBENNETT.BSKY.SOCIAL

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

MATHS

Edexcel Level 2 Extended Maths Certificate – Study and Practice

A comprehensive workbook for this new qualification aimed at high-achieving GCSE students.



Collins

AT A GLANCE

- **Designed for use as both a class text and a self-study resource**
- **Packed full of key points and worked examples**
- **Complete curriculum coverage**
- **Written by experienced maths education specialists**

REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES

There is a time to panic, and a time to not panic. My first reaction upon being asked to review this Edexcel Level 2 Extended Maths Certificate Study and Practice book was to panic.

I haven't looked at KS4 maths for decades. Literally. For the history buffs amongst you, it was still called 'O Level' back then. I had no idea what a Level 2 Extended Maths Certificate even was – though my ignorance was somewhat justified after discovering this is a new qualification only introduced last year, the first exams for which are due to be held this coming summer.

To the uninitiated, the Level 2 Extended Maths Certificate is designed to provide extra stretch and challenge for high-achieving GCSE students. The fact that it's so new raises some questions, however – chief among them, what support is there for students looking to practice and revise in the run-up to exam day?

The answer lies in this study and practice book from Collins. It's like a state-of-the-art, no-nonsense multigym for your maths muscles. Suitable for use as both a class text and self-study resource, it's packed full of key points and worked examples.

It's also refreshingly direct and to-the-point. Once I'd managed to dust down my 'maths brain' and fire it up, I could instantly see how it would help me zero in on the relevant topics and take in some clear examples, without having to wade through dense text and pretty pictures.

So don't expect much in the way of frills, but I doubt the students it's intended for would want any. The clean, simple layout instead connects you to everything you need with admirably clear signposting. Each section starts with a summary of what will be demonstrated and some key vocabulary. All explanations and examples are accompanied by handy hints and tips for answering relevant questions.

There then follow plenty of exercise questions with which to practice and apply what's been learnt. All exercises are graded through four levels – from Pass to Distinction* – enabling students to easily tell precisely what level they're working at and what they could be targeting. Each chapter concludes with a set of exam-style questions, so that students can familiarise themselves with the sort of challenges they can expect be faced with in the exam hall.

The answers can all be found at the back, as you might expect, but given the quality of the explanations, I'd have every confidence that the students using this book will get the questions right without peeking.

After working their way through this book, or using it to focus on revising topics they've perhaps struggled with, students should be able to face their Level 2 Extended Maths Certificate exams with confidence – no panicking required.

teach SECONDARY

VERDICT

- ✓ Concise and to the point
- ✓ Well organised and signposted
- ✓ Clear and comprehensive
- ✓ Differentiated questions
- ✓ Versatile and invaluable

UPGRADE IF...

... you want efficient, effective teaching and revision support for this new maths qualification.

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MATHS

Sumdog Maths

An engaging, game-based maths practice platform that motivates pupils while generating valuable insights for teachers

AT A GLANCE

- **Aligned with the national curriculum and White Rose Maths**
- **Adaptable to the needs and abilities of all pupils**
- **Allows teachers to set targeted maths practice tasks in minutes**
- **Automatically generates data for monitoring progress and identifying learning gaps**
- **Known to increase maths fluency**

REVIEWED BY: TS REVIEWER

Even when you love what you're doing, whether it's sport, music or reading, practice can be a bit of a grind. For those who lack confidence or motivation, that mental obstacle can seem almost insurmountable. Yet, as we all know, new skills have to be diligently practised for the knowledge to become embedded.

The trick, then, is to make it as fun or engaging as possible. When it comes to maths or aspects of literacy, that can be easier said than done. However, given the endless hours many of us seem happy to dedicate to largely unproductive tasks, such as playing computer games, it is no wonder that interactive approaches to practising core subjects have flooded the market during the internet age. Finding one that meets your school's needs, though, can be a challenge.

For many, the answer has been Sumdog. Since its humble beginnings over 10 years ago, Sumdog has been dedicated to developing and refining an inclusive, absorbing platform where pupils of all abilities and backgrounds can practise their taught skills. The aim was to create a safe, inclusive space where everyone feels represented, and no longer believes that there are some areas of the primary and KS3 maths curriculum in which they cannot enjoy success.

So, how does the reality match up to the ambition? First and foremost, it does objectively have a positive impact on maths fluency, according to research. And, as many a teacher will affirm, students often know what to do – the challenge is for them to do it accurately and efficiently enough – i.e. with sufficient fluency – to perform well in tests and exams.

The tasks can be easily tailored according to students' age and ability levels. The questions are also designed to be fully aligned with the National Curriculum and White Rose Maths. The automatic marking and data analysis functions additionally mean that you, as the teacher, can easily monitor progress and spot gaps in understanding.

From the student's point of view, Sumdog Maths is genuinely entertaining. Turning learning into a game is a time-honoured technique for improving outcomes – and which child or young teen these days doesn't enjoy computer games, given the chance to play? Should you need further reassurance, however, Sumdog includes mechanisms that will prevent users from rushing the tasks in order to focus on the gameplay.

Used sensibly, Sumdog is clearly an effective tool for incentivising and rewarding maths practice, whilst giving teachers valuable intelligence as to how their pupils are doing. Considering how it also removes the headache of setting and marking constructive maths homework, you might find your colleagues sitting up and begging to give it a go...

VERDICT

- ✓ Fun and engaging
- ✓ Promotes fluency
- ✓ Inclusive and customisable
- ✓ Convenient for teachers
- ✓ Generates valuable insights

UPGRADE IF...

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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

The only way is ethics

John Lawson proposes a bold, albeit tried and tested way of approaching the study of RE...

Religion cannot be reduced to ethics – but nor can it be limited to scripture, history and sacraments. Throughout my career, I've been able to establish that religious education – or indeed religious studies – is one of the most engaging and purposeful GCSE subjects there is.

Or at least it can be, when we push personal ethics to the forefront of our KS4 teaching…

Scratching the itch

Of the multiple philosophy courses I studied at university, the most memorable had the provocative title, 'Images in Modern Culture: Porn, Pop, Pulp and Politics'. This imaginative, interdisciplinary course was vastly over-subscribed – one assumes – because it scratched a very particular itch amongst the students. I went on adapt that course later in my career for groups of American teenagers, prompting my boss at the time – an elderly Catholic priest – to admit that I'd done as much as any teacher to elevate the status of religious education.

Despite having been initially (and perhaps understandably) alarmed by my talk of 'sexy theology' when we'd talked about what I was planning, he relaxed once I explained that I meant 'sexy' in the teen-friendly, synonym sense of 'engaging' and 'attention-grabbing'.

Because, I reasoned, If we aren't turning teenagers on to learning, we are switching them off. Teaching adolescents to engage with pressing contemporary issues is what outstanding educators from Socrates to Attenborough have always done.

Happiness versus pleasure

Does that mean to say we can study pornography in RE classes? Of course. We can, and should – just so long as the discussions we have are sensitively managed to in a way that respects the participants' dignity and the message of the class.

Christians aren't opposed to God's gift of sexuality; rather, we exhort sexual activity as a private and powerful expression of our love for someone we love. What happens in people's bedrooms should remain in their bedrooms.

Why, then, should we accept the degrading forms of online pornography that most teens will have seen as a social good? It's difficult – though necessary – to separate love from lust and happiness from pleasure if we wish to find fulfilment in our relationships.

Whilst I respect those who oppose Christian views of sexuality, I'm surely justified in challenging that some sexual acts are more expressions of 'licence' than 'freedom'. Restriction and self-control is an intrinsic feature of all social freedoms. So it follows that teenagers need to have intellectually challenging discussions about sexual morality in their lessons.

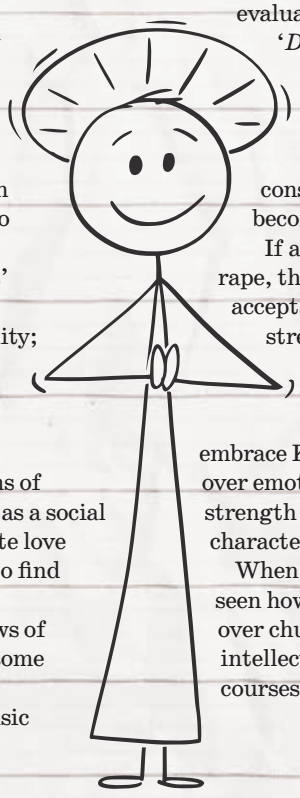
Free to choose

The foundational question for all ethicists concerns God's moral authority. If there is no God, as Dostoyevsky once observed, then all things are permissible.

And yet, while it *is* perfectly rational to believe in God, producing absolute proof remains impossible. Faith and freedom only make sense if we are *free to choose*. The Bible contains holy texts that were written by wise and holy prophets, but it cannot literally *be* the 'Word of God'. The divinely inspired prophets were never mere microphones; they were all flesh and blood human beings, complete with their own distinct biases and flaws.

Ethics fosters moral autonomy by not permitting us to dissolve controversial questions by asserting that 'God' or 'religious leaders' say X is right or wrong. As such, the course I taught carefully examined ethical theories, thus providing a robust framework for examinations of countless contemporary issues – from prejudice, racism, crime and punishment, to drugs, poverty, war/peace, media bias and political dynamics – as well as human and animal rights.

The potential topics are legion, and most teenagers enjoy evaluating them. When I pose the relativist question, '*Do we, in 'The West', have any right to dictate global cultural norms?*', my students are adamant that we don't. But when they see the harsh physical punishments suffered by millions of children through the practice of FGM, military conscription and exploitative labour conditions, they become less confident.



If all morality is relative, then where in the world are rape, thuggery, torture or murder deemed morally acceptable? Teenagers will tend to find utilitarianism's stress on happiness attractive, right up until they realise how easily happiness can lapse into hedonism. Can two opposite teachings be equally true? Subjectivists/emotivists think so. Why embrace Kantian ethics, with its placing of reason and logic over emotional intelligence? Arguably the greatest strength of Christian ethics is the value it places upon character and virtue.

When we listen to teenagers' views – as I did, having seen how they overwhelmingly chose the study of ethics over church history – they will often view such courses as intellectually stimulating and inclusive, in ways that courses primarily focused on the church typically aren't.

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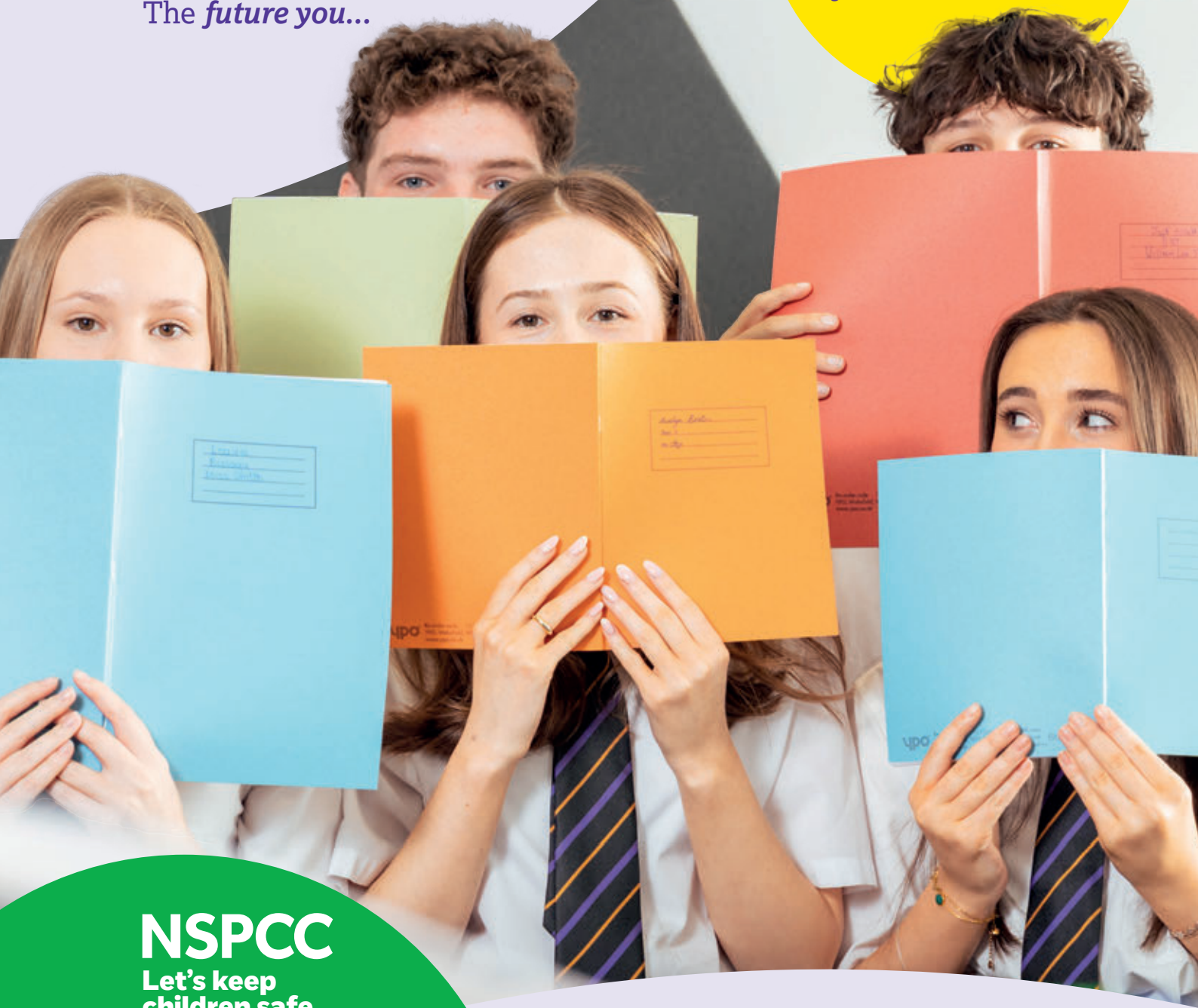

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