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# teach SECONDARY

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co

INTERVIEW



ADE ADEPITAN

*"A 'good miss'  
beats not trying"*

## FRESH START

Will the new curriculum  
change your practice?

## DOESN'T COMPUTE

How to set AI-proof  
homework

## EXAMS FOR EVERYONE

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for SEND students?

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should embrace  
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## FROM THE EDITOR

### “Welcome...



We hear a lot these days about the things that schools ‘should’ be teaching children and young people. Sometimes, these will be specific topics or subjects that don’t yet have a formal place within the National Curriculum, but arguably should. See financial education, for example – which, depending on how the government responds to the Curriculum and Assessment Review, may well be appearing in maths and PSHE schemes of work sooner rather than later.

And then there are those suggestions for areas that schools are, in fact, covering already, albeit perhaps not as comprehensively as they’d like to be. The prime example of which must surely be ‘critical thinking’.

*Everyone* wants to see school students given a solid grounding in critical thinking. Employers, parents, think tanks, charities, policymakers – they all want today’s students to become savvy navigators of the modern information landscape, able to swiftly distinguish between the real and the fake, and pick up on not just the detail of what they see and hear, but *why* they’re seeing and hearing it.

That’s a noble enough ambition, but one that appears increasingly at odds with the growing expectation that those same young people will be regularly interacting with generative AI technologies built around large language models. It’s one thing to confront an online information space populated by a succession of helpful, supportive, opinionated, spiteful and malign humans, where competing claims and counter-claims must be carefully weighed up and interrogated. It’s quite another when the authorial voices of whichever Microsoft, Google, Meta, Amazon or Apple services you might be using *confidently tell you things that are verifiably false*.

Then again, perhaps that’s what’s driving all these urgent calls for students to be well-versed in critical thinking. With hallucinations and factual fever dreams an inevitable by-product of how modern AI systems function, will we need younger generations to approach the world in a perpetual state of forensic vigilance in order to get anything done and prevent the global economy from toppling over?

Call it pessimism if you wish, but those are the thoughts that will be at the back of my mind as Bett 2026 gets underway later this month (see p47 for our show preview). Once again, we can expect AI solutions to be taking centre stage, amid promises of swifter student assessments, elegantly streamlined admin and hugely valuable data insights that school leaders could never have accessed otherwise. Which is all well and good.

Because if the aim is to get students thinking for themselves, that’s something we can all get on board with. Where you lose me – and, I suspect most people – is when it looks as though the machines are being primed to do our thinking for us.

Enjoy the issue,

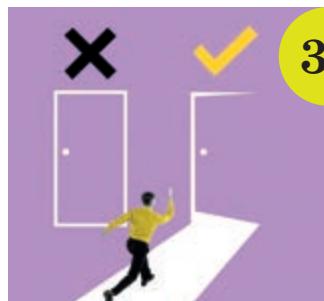
Callum Fauser  
callum.fauser@theteachco.com

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Katharine Radice is a teacher, education consultant and author



Aaron Swan is an English teacher



Hannah Carter is a headteacher based at The Kernal Academies Trust



Anthony David is an executive headteacher



Alice Guile is an art teacher



Jose Sala Diaz is a head of media



### KEEP IN TOUCH!

Sign up for the weekly TS newsletter at [teachwire.net/newsletter](https://teachwire.net/newsletter)

**“I can’t do that, Dave”**

How to ‘AI-proof’ your homework tasks

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## artichoke

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[rpf.io/adacomputerscience2026](https://rpf.io/adacomputerscience2026)



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# The newsletter

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

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

### AUSTRALIA'S SOCIAL MEDIA BAN

If there's one thing that's really annoying about how children and adolescents conduct themselves these days, it's the interminable amount of time they spend on their phones, am I right? As I was saying on the staff WhatsApp group last week, it's like they're all plugged into a hive mind, unable to think for themselves. My generation - who went outdoors when we were young, who hung out with each other in real places - we can see just how brainwashed they are. I said that on Bluesky last week and got 43 likes. Everyone agrees with me.

I mean, okay, yes. So the youth clubs closed down. Sports clubs don't get as much council funding. Mm, sure, there are laws now that mean kids can't gather as casually in parks and town centres as they used to.

And, yeah, okay, the gig venues are shut, and record shops don't really exist any more. And cafes are really expensive.

Yeah, fine. But social media's *really* evil, isn't it? The Australian government knows that, which is why they've banned it for all under 16s. ALL of them. And the fines for non-compliance are huge, like £25 million or something - and it's the social media companies that will pay them, which is the way it should be, right? No, I don't know why online gaming isn't included. Because that's effectively a type of social media too, isn't it? Those companies must have really good lobbyists, I suppose...



**DO SAY**  
"#seeyouwhen  
im16"



**DON'T SAY**  
"Greetings, fellow  
grown-ups"

## BEAT THE BUDGET

What are we talking about?  
Switched On

Who is it for?  
KS1-KS4



**What's on offer?**  
Ahead of rail safety education becoming a mandatory part of the PSHE curriculum as of September 2026, 'Switched On' is a new website from Network Rail with a range of free teaching resources available for download. The KS3/4 selections include safety videos featuring noted TikTok personality Big Manny, as well as materials for stimulating classroom debate and discussion.



Where is it available?  
[switchedonrailsafety.co.uk](http://switchedonrailsafety.co.uk)

## “WHAT THEY SAID...

"Academic excellence that traumatises some pupils is not true excellence. Discipline through fear is not preparing young people for life as confident, independent adults."

*Children's services expert, Sir Alan Wood CBE, writing in a Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review relating to Mossbourne Victoria Park Academy*

## Think of a number...

**£3 billion**

Size of recently announced government investment in creating 50,000 specialist places in mainstream schools for children with SEND

Source: DfE

**500,911**

The number of unauthorised holiday absences recorded by schools nationally, between September and early November 2025

Source: DfE

**15.6%**

of schoolchildren aged 5 to 16 have a high level of social and emotional need

Source: education charity nurtureuk ([nurtureuk.org](http://nurtureuk.org))

## ONE FOR THE WALL

"The voice of civilization speaks an unmistakable language against the isolation of families, nations and races, and pleads for composite nationality as essential to her triumphs"

*Frederick Douglass, speaking in 1867*



## You may now type...

Should students be able to submit their answers in GCSEs and A Level exams with the aid of touchscreens and/or keyboards, rather than having to write them out by hand? It's a question that's been extensively discussed and debated across the profession for a number of years, and one that Ofqual is now giving serious consideration to, following its introduction last month of a set of proposals it's currently consulting on.

The existing proposals would see the four exam boards responsible for delivering GCSEs, AS and A Levels in England given permission to introduce up to two new on-screen specifications each (subject to final Ofqual accreditation).

Ofqual seems to be proceeding with caution, however, having declared that this won't apply to those subjects with over 100,000 entries nationally. For those non-core and less popular subjects that fit the criteria, exam boards will be required to offer on-screen and paper exams as separate qualifications, with entirely different sets of questions. Students would moreover be prevented from using their own personal devices to complete any on-screen exams.

According to Ofqual's Chief Regulator, Sir Ian Bauckham, "We must maintain the standards and fairness that define England's qualifications system. Any introduction of on-screen exams must be carefully managed to protect all students' interests, and these proposals set out a controlled approach with rigorous safeguards."

**The consultation runs until 5th March 2026; responses can be emailed to [consultations@ofqual.gov.uk](mailto:consultations@ofqual.gov.uk) or submitted through an online consultation form that can be accessed via [tinyurl.com/ts151-NL1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-NL1)**

## SAVE THE DATE

### 21-23 JANUARY 2026

Bett  
ExCeL London  
[uk.bettshow.com](http://uk.bettshow.com)

A must for any intrepid explorers of cutting-edge edtech, Bett is a three-day exhibition of the most advanced products, solutions and services the sector has to offer. Beyond the extensive show floor you'll also find an array of informative presentations addressing a wide spectrum of topics (both tech-related and otherwise), CPD opportunities aplenty and a series of thought-provoking keynote talks.

## SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

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



### Chancellor delivers 2025 Budget

**WHO?** Rachel Reeves, Chancellor of the Exchequer

**WHERE?** House of Commons

**WHEN?** 26th November 2025

"I will provide £5m for libraries in secondary schools, building on the £10m commitment earlier this year to ensure that every primary school has a library. And thanks to representations from the members for Luton North and Bournemouth East, I am providing £18m to improve and upgrade playgrounds across England."

Let there be no doubt that this is a government on the side of our kids, who will back their potential. I came into politics because I believe every child has equal worth and deserves an equal chance to achieve their promise.

The biggest barrier to equal opportunity is child poverty. Because for every child that grows up in poverty, our society pays a triple cost. The first and the heaviest is to the child – going to school hungry, waking up in a cold home, or in another B&B. While other children enjoy the advantages of parents with time to help with homework, the quiet space at home to work in, too many go without.

And there is also the cost of supporting a family in poverty which ends up in the lap of overstretched councils who can do no more than shunt them into temporary accommodation, at huge cost to local taxpayers. Then there is the future cost, to our economy and our society, of wasted talent and a welfare system that bears the cost of failure for decades to come.

Since last July, we've rolled out free breakfast clubs in schools. We're expanding free school meals to half a million more kids, lifting 100,000 children out of poverty as we do it. Combined with other actions we are taking, this Labour government is achieving the biggest reduction in child poverty over a Parliament since records began."

#### THE RESPONSE:

### NASUWT responds to new attendance targets



**FROM?** Pepe Di'lasio, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders

**REGARDING?** Government plans to set every school individualised minimum targets for improving student attendance

**WHEN?** 12th November 2025

"Schools already move heaven and earth to ensure that all their pupils attend regularly, but many of the factors that contribute to absence are beyond their direct control. Setting them individual targets doesn't resolve those issues, but it does pile yet more pressure on school leaders and staff who are already under great strain."

"It would be far more effective for the government to ensure that every school has access to dedicated school attendance officers to work with families to understand the barriers to attendance and identify the support required to get children back into the classroom."

21-23 JANUARY 2026 Bett | 27 JANUARY 2026 SCA Year of Reading | 27 JANUARY to 10 FEBRUARY 2026 Education Insights

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ExCeL London  
[uk.bettshow.com](http://uk.bettshow.com)

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### 27 JANUARY 2026

SCA Year of Reading  
Sutton Community Academy (NG17 1EE)  
[tinyurl.com/ts151-NL2](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-NL2)

Organised by Sutton Community Academy, and taking place at its Sutton-in-Ashfield premises, this four-and-a-half-hour event is dedicated to exploring and demystifying the school's favoured reading strategy, and the successful impact it's had upon students' levels of engagement, comprehension and achievement over the past three years.

### 27 JANUARY TO 10 FEBRUARY 2026

Education Insights  
Manchester, Birmingham, Gateshead and Bristol  
[educationinsightsevents.com](http://educationinsightsevents.com)

The Education Insights series will take place over four separate dates across the country, with each event seeing inspiring speeches by the likes of Professor David Olusoga OBE, Baroness Floella Benjamin and others, combined with panel discussions and sessions on how to improve your practice led by expert teachers. Attendance is free for educators, and each event will have its own overarching theme.

# Cabinet of Curiosity

*Developing a superpower*

James Handscombe

Curiosity is a superpower: the more curious you are, the more questions you ask, the more answers you get, the more you know, and the more that further stimulates curiosity.

**Chapter 2: Topology**

**Answers app:**  
1. It was an oversight; it can now go. I shall call this *unicyclic* (one cycle).  
2. It's absolutely fine to have 'isolated' vertices, edges or faces - the *isolated* is a mathematical construction and these elements don't mathematically mean anything, they just are.  
3. The lack of vertices in Italy is simply because it pleased me aesthetically (and made this point - thank you for asking the question).

A simplified map of Italy will demonstrate how one could draw something that wasn't a network.

problems here (mathematically, I make no comment on geopolitics - just not in this version) are the Vatican City and San Marino. As drawn, by breaking rules 2, 9 and 7.

2. Each vertex must be reachable from every other vertex - here the San Marino vertex is not.

3. Every edge joins two vertices - here, the Vatican City edge joins no vertices to itself.

7. A face cannot have any holes in it - here, the Italy face has two (one for the Vatican City and one for San Marino). If you walked all the way round one of the smaller faces trailing string behind you to make a loop, then you couldn't pull the loop in without it leaving Italy.

13 14

Answers app

**Cabinet of Curiosity**

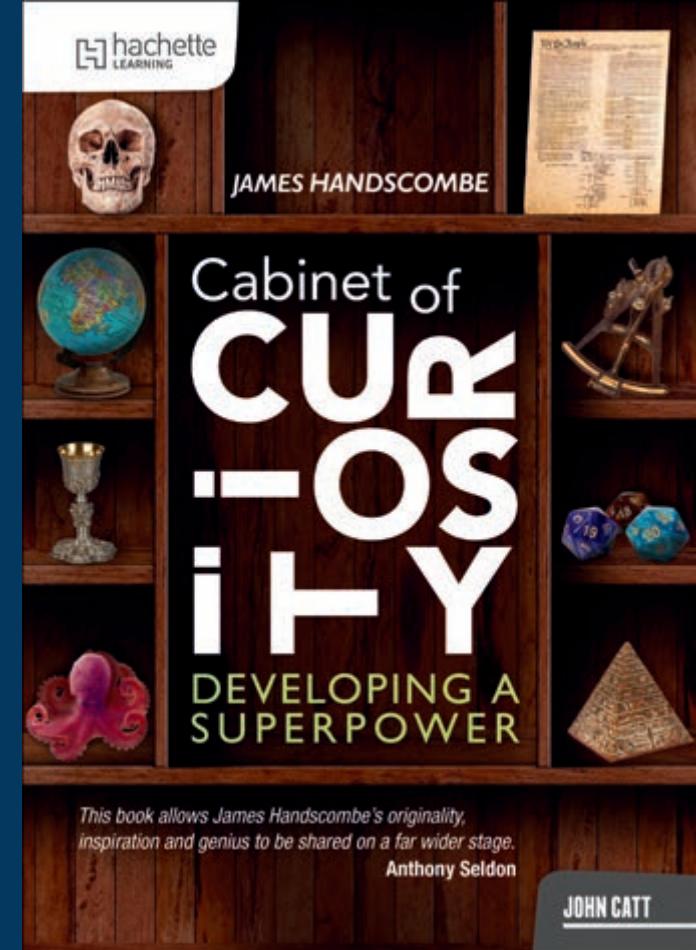
We can make this into a network (which, following precedent, I shall call 'San Giuliano') by adding a vertex and two edges. Notice that Italy is still a single face because you can wander across it without crossing any edges. (We don't care about having to do a really long road trip for these purposes.)

We can now, and you would have thought this would be quite straightforward but experience says otherwise, count the number of vertices, edges and faces in our networks and put them in a table.

Network	Vertices	Edges	Faces
Italy	11	12	2
San Giuliano	12	14	1

Because I have only two networks it's unlikely that you'll see a pattern, but there is one and you can experiment with a pen and some paper to try to find it. I recommend drawing smaller networks with just a handful of vertices for ease of counting and will warn here until you do.

Ok. We can add another column on the right with the formula  $V - E + F$  and note that  $11 - 12 + 2 = -1$  (and  $12 - 14 + 1 = -1$ ) which has been given. If you do this for every network you will find that all correctly drawn and counted networks give the same answer.



JOHN CATT

James Handscombe's ***Cabinet of Curiosity*** is a practical, thought-provoking exploration of how to put curiosity back at the heart of education. Drawing on classroom experience and real examples, Handscombe offers a course designed to help teachers and leaders kick-start a culture of questioning and wonder. Discover chapters on:

- Culture and curiosity
- Topology
- Art appreciation for beginners
- The curiosity toolkit
- British politics

And much more!



## FIND OUT MORE:

[hachettelearning.com/teaching-strategies/cabinet-of-curiosity](http://hachettelearning.com/teaching-strategies/cabinet-of-curiosity)



# TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

## Up for interpretation

Whilst supervising a group of around 40 students about to take an exam - many of whom were from overseas - I spotted one student looking agitated. I approached and quietly asked if he understood what was required of him. In a hushed tone, he replied "I chocked my pants." We both stared at each other for a moment. With heart in mouth, I asked him to repeat what he'd said. He did so, more urgently this time. Trying to discreetly sniff as I bent towards him, I mentally calculated how we could leave the room with some dignity and get the poor lad some help.

Whereupon he turned to the desk behind, picked up some writing implements and made a show of dropping them. Then the penny dropped for me. "Oh, you dropped your pens," I said with relief. I practically sprinted to the front of the room to source some replacements for him, and was rewarded with a huge smile...

## If the shoe doesn't fit...

I once stopped a Y7 boy wearing trainers at breaktime and asked him where his shoes were. He told me that he'd had PE the previous day, last period, and when he got home, discovered that he was wearing two left shoes. He'd brought both shoes in, and was now heading to the PE department to sort the issue out.

Moments later, I stopped another boy, similarly wearing trainers, and also hobbling. When I enquired what the problem was, he described having had a PE lesson the previous day, and finding it unusually painful to walk that morning, only to find he was wearing two right shoes. I gently led him to the other boy I'd just seen, and left them with the words, "You two need to talk..."

**Have a memorable true school tale or anecdote of your own? Share the details, and find more amusing stories, at [schoolhumour.co.uk](http://schoolhumour.co.uk)**

## A FEW MINUTES OF DESIGN

### #38 YOUR TYPE

*A Few Minutes of Design* YOUR TYPE

# ADVENTURE



Three new additions to the *Into Film* + that schools can view throughout January

### LOVE & FRIENDSHIP (2016, PG, 93 MINUTES)

Sharp, comedic adaptation of the Jane Austen novella *Lady Susan*, in which the scheming, selfish and recently widowed Lady Susan finds herself in need of a new husband...



**Curriculum links:**  
English literature, PSHE, history

### TISH (2023, 15, 90 MINUTES)

Documentary profiling the career of photographer Tish Murtha, who captured the lives of working-class communities in the North East of England during the 1980s.



**Curriculum links:**  
Art and design, history

### OKJA (2017, 15, 121 MINUTES)

Eco-thriller from South Korean director Bong Joon-Ho, about a super pig bred over a decade as part of a corporate experiment, its teenage girl owner and the activists out to rescue it.



**Curriculum links:**  
Film studies, science

Head online to [intofilm.org](http://intofilm.org) to stream these films for free and download their film guides, which include Teacher's Notes to facilitate classroom discussion and suggested excerpts for closer examination

 **Like and subscribe**  
Who's been saying what on the socials this month?

**Dr Abeba Birhane** @abeba.bsky.social

Integrating genAI into education will result in commercialization of a collective responsibility: fostering & cultivating the coming generation - and this responsibility can't be left to an industry that has aligned with authoritarian regimes, prioritises profit at any cost, and is powering fascism

**David Didau** @DavidDidau

Belonging is Ofsted's latest buzzword, but most of the noise misses the point. Children do not experience school through vibes or pastoral weather systems. They experience it through language, the medium that shapes every rule they interpret and every social cue they decode. If we treat belonging as emotional rather than about meaning, we will keep trying to solve the wrong problem.

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# DICTIONARY DEEP DIVE

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

David Voisin is a head of MFL

## PARDON MY FRENCH

My mother was born in Champagne. No, that's not some avant-garde birthing method – I refer, of course, to the French region where the famous sparkling drink is made. The 'appellation contrôlée' (controlled naming) prevents any drink not originally hailing from the eponymous geographical area from adopting the name. The same applies to cognac. In French, it goes under the label 'Eau de Vie' (water of life) – which, interestingly, is also the meaning of 'whisky'; if one traces that word's etymological roots back to the Celtic language, 'Bordeaux', meanwhile, shares its name with a French city located on the Atlantic coast, which literally means 'Waterside'.

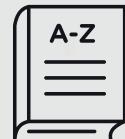


## TEACHING TIP: ACRONYMS

Any field of language is suffused with acronyms, and education is no exception. We've all heard of SPaG, ERIC, DEAR *et al.*, and as mnemonics – named after Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory – acronyms have their place. But do we sometimes go overboard? Possibly. Those of a more cynical inclination might even see the acronym as an Annoyingly Cringe Rhetorical Operation Numbing Your Mind, but the real problem is when acronyms mislead students.

I recently saw a social media post urging teachers to introduce a small number of words that students could use to embellish and improve their language, grouped together as acronyms – 'AMAZE' and 'IMPRESS' being two examples. The definitions and examples given for each word group were highly restrictive, however, and contained some egregious mistakes. One suggested that the verb 'regress' could be used as a synonym for 'deteriorate'.

The obvious issue here can be neatly illustrated via an episode of the sitcom *Friends*. The character Joey is attempting to write a love letter to someone he wants to impress, but he alas doesn't possess much in the way of linguistic knowledge or flair. He resorts to using a thesaurus, and ends up producing a hilarious cacophony of over-complicated words that make little sense. The key lesson is that there's no such thing as an 'impressive word' – at least not in isolation. Vocabulary instruction is about word depth, not word hierarchy. Accuracy and beauty are sometimes best achieved through simplicity and parsimony.



## LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

 Language is evidently about meaning, but limiting it to sheer semantics is to underestimate its potency. If words have the power to mesmerise us, it's because language is about much more than conveying a message; it's also about aesthetics. In this sense, you could argue that it's almost like music – so why do certain structures 'sound' right?

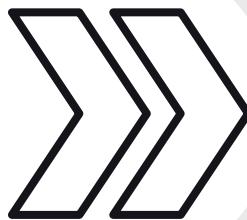
Elegant language appeals to our senses because it follows certain structural and cognitive principles. Just the addition or omission of an adjective or adverb can affect the pace of a sentence. Interestingly, numbers matter when it comes to language, with the number three often at the centre of eloquent constructions.

This stems from the fact that three is a small number, and thus relatively harmless in terms of cognitive load – but also because of the symmetrical word formations it allows us to construct. It helps the speaker generate both beauty and efficiency.

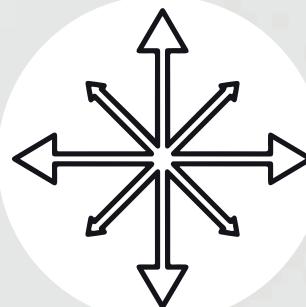
It's why famous leaders are fond of using rhetorical devices such as the tricolon (see Julius Caesar's 'Veni Vidi Vici'), epizeuxis (Tony Blair's 1996 'Education, education, education' speech) and anaphora (Obama's 2008 exhortation of 'Yes, we can'). These can sometimes be combined, as with Lincoln's memorable 'Government of the people, by the people, for the people' in his Gettysburg Address (which employs both tricolon and anaphora).

Too often, we can dichotomise language and mathematics – yet the Greeks taught us both geometry and rhetorics for a reason...

## SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS



Making progress means 'moving forward'.



When we **digress**, we're moving away from the topic at hand



A **transgression** refers to a move across or beyond conventions

# Class is in THERAPY SESSION

In its attempts to tackle mental health challenges among children and teens, the government risks diverting schools from their core mission, cautions **Dave Clements...**

**T**he government has committed to assigning mental health professionals to every school in England by 2029/30. It plans to do this by expanding the deployment of mental health support teams (MHSTs), as part of broader plans to ensure all pupils are able to access specialist mental health support. But do we really *need* mental health professionals in every single school?

One could argue that if the extent of the mental health crisis afflicting our children is as bad as we're told it is, even this won't be enough; that we'll soon need mental health professionals permanently situated in every classroom.

## A flood of initiatives

In June 2025, the government shared figures that suggested over 22% of people aged 16 to 64 have 'common mental health conditions', and duly responded with promises of more money, more mental health staff and more initiatives to prevent things from getting any worse.

However, this is an approach that evidently hasn't worked yet – despite many years of early interventions, prevention strategies and provision of additional support aimed at helping those with mental health difficulties from suffering any further. Back in 2007, that proportion of 16- to 64-year-olds with common mental health conditions amounted to 17%.

The government currently advocates for a 'whole school' approach, which at times seems to privilege the mental health and wellbeing of young people over all else. Yet despite a flood of mental health initiatives across schools, colleges and universities, both before and since the calamitous closure of schools during COVID, demand has only grown larger, with mental health services continuing to struggle – as any parent trying to access CAMHS knows all too well.

Support found that 82% of teacher respondents said pupil wellbeing had 'Negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing.' 70% were similarly affected after having had 'challenging interactions' with parents. Is this the best way of understanding the problems of the classroom? Setting aside the therapeutic framing of this particular survey, the results seem to support the idea that concerns around mental health and wellbeing support

are now dominating the teaching profession and wider education sector.

It's become as apparent in the higher education space as it is in the nation's primaries and secondaries. In recent years, Cambridge University has reviewed the use of its Tripos rankings, whereby students were informed where they ranked among their cohort following a set of annual exams.

The practice dates back to 1748, with all results publicly displayed in the historical buildings where graduation ceremonies are held – so why the change? A taskforce appointed by the university binned this centuries-old tradition due to it feeding into a 'culture of overwork' at Cambridge that was having a negative impact on students' mental health.

## **"Despite a flood of mental health initiatives across schools, colleges and universities, demand has only grown larger"**

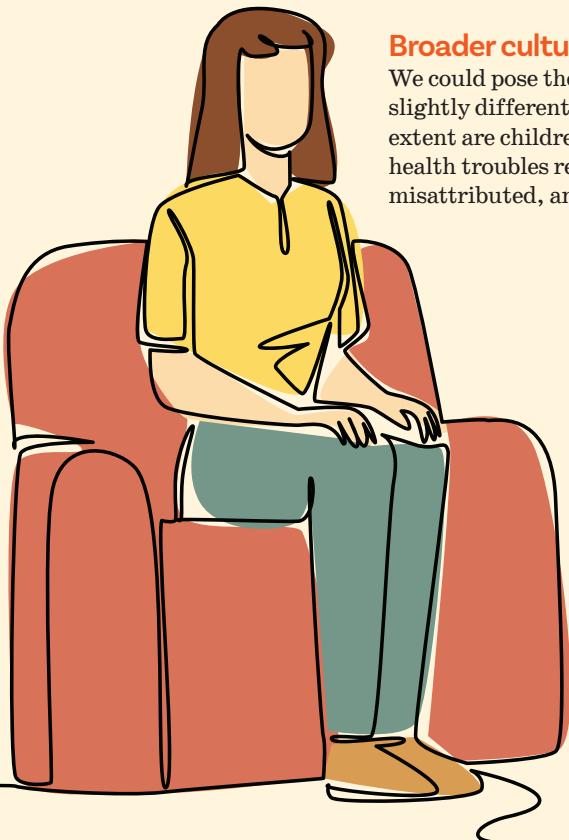
There are some important questions here that need to be answered. Are we simply more aware of the nature of mental health issues and their prevalence? Or are we at risk of over-diagnosing kids with conditions they don't actually have? What can schools realistically do? Should they turn themselves into psychiatric institutions, or get back to what they were once understood to do best – imparting knowledge?

## **Therapeutic framing**

It's not just the kids whose mental health is apparently in decline. In a 2024 survey of how pupil and parent behaviour impacts upon staff morale and wellbeing, Education

## **Broader cultural shifts**

We could pose the question slightly differently – to what extent are children's mental health troubles real or misattributed, and to what



## Join the CONVERSATION

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extent are they a consequence of broader cultural shifts in society?

According to Bijan Omrani, author of *God is an Englishman: Christianity and the Creation of England*, this kind of therapeutic thinking has been with us for some time: “*You start to get the rise of the world of the self from the 1960s, and a shift away from the old orientation to emotions that sought to damp them down, forget about them in order that society can function.*” The new idea, Omrani explains, is to “*Work out and cherish and cultivate all of the deep individual desires you have, no matter how disruptive they might be.*”

Children’s mental health has even become a topic for assemblies. As trained counsellor Lucy Beney argues in *Suffer the Children*, a paper she

produced for Family Education Trust (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-TP1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-TP1)), “*If whole year groups in school have assemblies on mental health issues, it is inevitable that some present who may previously have been unbothered, will start to wonder if passing feelings are more significant than they actually are, as everything is interpreted through a therapeutic lens.*”

In Beney’s view, the same applies to so-called ‘mindfulness lessons’. She cites one parent who asked their local authority if they could opt out of mindfulness interventions they considered to be potentially damaging to their children’s emotional lives. Those delivering such

interventions aren’t necessarily qualified to do so, and may therefore be doing

more harm than good. It seems like a modest request – can’t parents trust schools to not subject their children to mental health initiatives they could do without?

As Beney concludes, “*While more resources than ever before are being expended on mental health, the situation appears to be getting worse year on year.*”

### Redefining the issue

It would appear that we’re now dealing with the consequences of a shift away from the ‘stiff upper lip’ culture of old (which may, admittedly, have had some problems of its own), compounded by the more recent distress resulting from the devastating impact of school closures during the COVID pandemic.

The numbers of children with anxiety issues, special needs and ‘behaviour disorders’ are all on the rise, despite this therapeutic and inclusive approach having been in place for decades. It’s clearly not working.

By understanding children more as psychologically troubled and in need of support, have we been failing to address needs that stem from a lack of effective socialisation? By putting every child ‘on the couch’ or labelling them with something, are we redefining what might be better

understood as problems related to their upbringing? Worse still, are we diverting much-needed resources away from those who really need them?



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

## IN BRIEF

### WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

The perception among policymakers and officials is that challenges around youth mental health are now so acute that one potential measure could be to give every school access to a specialist mental health support team by the end of the decade.

### WHAT'S BEING SAID?

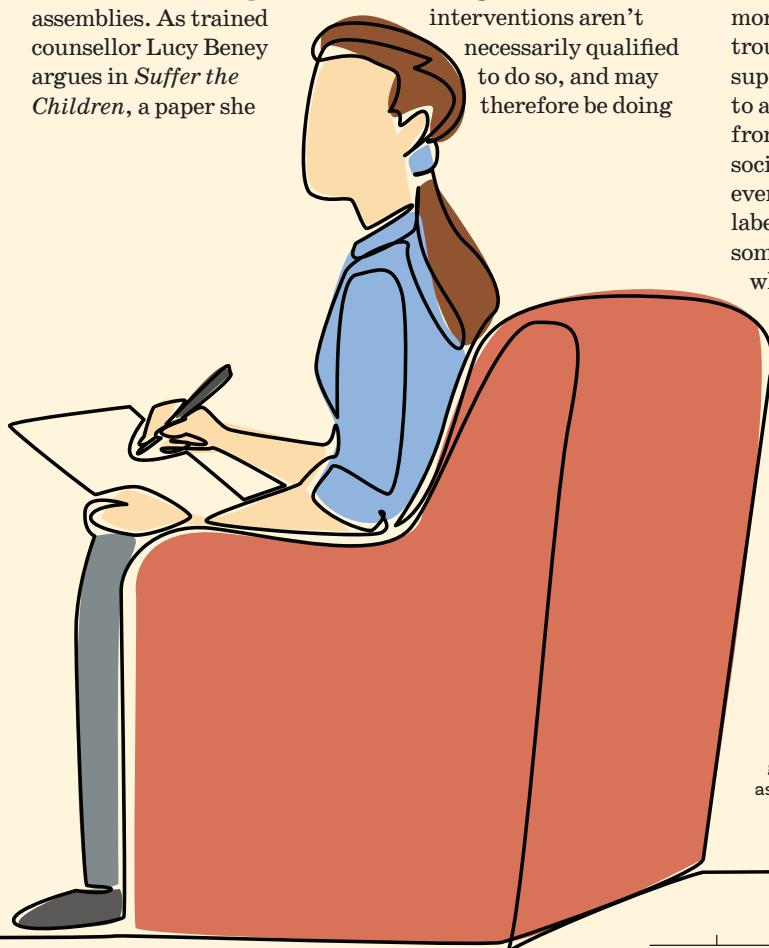
Survey findings regularly show that rates of mental ill health – already notably high even before the COVID 19 pandemic – have soared in recent years, and largely stayed at a high level. This has prompted educators across many schools and universities – including Cambridge – to review some long-established traditions and methods of assessment, while tackling what they see as an entrenched ‘culture of overwork’.

### WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING?

The after-effects of the post-COVID experience have combined with society-wide shifts (already underway for some time) that have seen individual emotional responses given primacy over collective stoicism. At the same time, a growing awareness of mental health issues may, in some cases, have served to pathologise otherwise standard adolescent sensations and behaviours.

### THE TAKEAWAY

It’s difficult to say with certainty whether the scale of the mental health challenge may be overstated or not. But even in the event that the relevant reports and survey figures are all accurate, they appear to indicate that the ‘wellbeing and mindfulness’ culture now prominent within many schools hasn’t been enough to meet said challenge – thus suggesting that we might want to embark on a different strategy instead.



The recently published Curriculum and Assessment Review seems to call for a careful adjustment of the government's education priorities – but its cautious language conceals what may yet prove to be some genuinely profound changes in the years ahead...

# Melissa Benn



The opening statements of the Curriculum and Assessment Review's recently published final report (see [tinyurl.com/ts148-NL2](http://tinyurl.com/ts148-NL2)) are a masterclass in the famous art of British diplomacy. Take this choice example from the foreword: "*The Review Panel recognises the hard-won successes and educational improvements of recent decades...*" And from the executive summary: "*We intend to maintain and build on the knowledge-rich approach and on the coherent structural architecture established by the last review.*"

The telling term here is 'knowledge-rich' – a useful shorthand for what the Conservatives believe they brought to state education, in part through the implementation of their own highly controversial curriculum and assessment review back in 2014.

## Substantive reform

In many ways then, Professor Becky Francis' review is a further indication of how widely adopted the radical reforms pioneered by Michael Gove have become. It concedes the settled (and in my opinion, wrong) view of many mainstream commentators on the centre-right, that education was the single greatest Conservative success in recent years; a victory of traditionalism over woolly progressivism.

At the same time, however, the conciliatory language of the Francis review serves to mask what seems like more substantive reform. The report's recommendations include: abolishing the English Baccalaureate; reducing the amount of time students spend in exams; restoring the academic status of the arts and other creative subjects; and strong arguments for the benefits of teaching oracy (once dismissed by former Schools Minister Nick Gibb as the encouragement of 'idle chatter' in classrooms).

These changes have been sold as '*Evolution, not revolution*' – but even within that messaging, there's some covert political signalling at work.

## Range of concessions

Firstly, Professor Francis will be acutely aware of the controversy – indeed, outrage – that accompanied the 2014 curriculum overhaul; how it triggered a national debate and resulted in widespread protest across the profession. It's clear that she wants to adopt a 'softly, softly' approach, and she appears to have succeeded in that aim. Thus far, there's been relatively little fuss, or indeed much mainstream debate at all of the 2024/5 review.

In her pointed comments about 'evolution not revolution', and publicly stated rejection of certain demands by some 'campaigners', Professor Francis shows a desire not to appear too radical or progressive. This is in line with the style and tone of the current Labour administration, which built its broad, yet shallow electoral majority in 2024 on an explicit rejection of so-called left-wing politics, and is currently moving rapidly to the right on other key social issues, notably immigration.

Even so, in examining the Review's proposed reforms, one can glimpse a range of concessions to myriad calls by campaigners, from both within and outside the profession, over the last 15 years. Many teachers and educationalists have, for

example, long decried the overstuffing of the curriculum at every stage of a child's life – from the bizarre requirement for 10-year-olds to grasp the use of 'fronted adverbials', to the insistence that secondary English and history students memorise great wads of 'traditionalist' knowledge.

Consider also the sustained and well-evidenced protests by many groups opposing the dramatic drop-off in arts subjects, oracy skills and citizenship studies over the past decade. Or, indeed, the work of those who have justly argued that the intensification of exams since 2014 has placed greater stress on pupils, widened divides between social classes and sidelined more effective forms of pupil assessment.

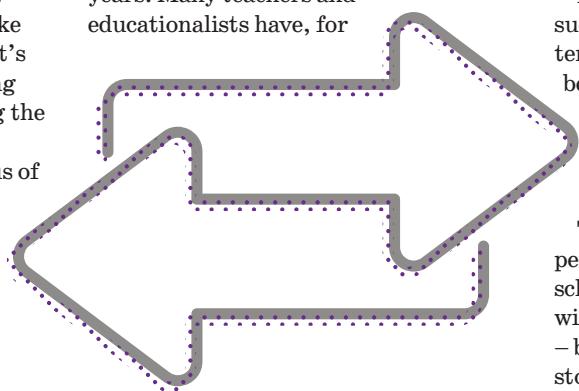
That the Review regularly emphasises the importance of fostering a 'love of learning' throughout its near 200-page length is surely down to the often marginalised work of educational progressives going back at least a decade, if not much longer.

## A positive direction?

For all the final report's diplomatic language, and the Review panel's apparent determination to not be seen as overly progressive, Professor Francis *et al.* are plainly trying to steer the system in a more positive direction. In many respects, they have come both to praise and bury Gove.

It's hard to know at this stage how successful the Review will be in the long term. There are several factors well beyond its control – not least ongoing staff shortages and declining morale, plus the evermore fraught question of SEND funding and continuing lack of capital investment.

To those challenges I would add the perennial problem of a hierarchical school structure sitting side-by-side with a nominal comprehensive system – but that, as they say, is another story...





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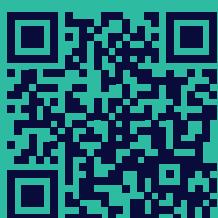
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# The end of an era?

The International Baccalaureate is dead – long live the spreadsheet...? 'I Teacher' reflects on what we might have lost in the name of cost savings...

**A** great stone façade looms high above Whitehall, swallowing the street below in its shadow. There it stands, the Department for Education – a monument to bureaucracy and beige carpeting, towering proudly above the grave of genuine learning. A shrine to 'value for money', an ever-present reminder that in the pursuit of endless improvement, we've simply managed to perfect the art of inexorable decline.

*Requiescat in pace,*  
education in England...

## Act of vandalism

All right, yes – I might sometimes be guilty of the occasional dramatic flourish. In my defence, however, the government's decision to withdraw its funding for additional teachers so that schools can offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) isn't 'just another policy tweak'. It's a deliberate act of vandalism, and, frankly, there's no metaphor too grand for that.

For those fortunate enough to have studied or taught it, the IB isn't just a qualification – it's a philosophy. Six subjects. Theory of Knowledge. A 4,000-word extended essay that often outpaces undergraduate work. 50 hours apiece of community service, physical action and creative endeavour.

It's not about cramming content or gaming grade boundaries, but about *learning how to think*. It's the gold standard of sixth-form education, in that it's global, rigorous and humane. Most crucially of all, it produces students who are



## "The IB isn't just a qualification – it's a philosophy"

more than the sum of their exam results. Nothing in GCSEs, A Levels or the broader National Curriculum even comes close.

Plus, universities love it. Admissions tutors practically drool over IB candidates. Faced with two equally bright students, who would you rather take? The one who's memorised parts of three subjects? Or the one who's actually *learned how to learn*, and can demonstrate that they're a fully-rounded human being?

**The price of excellence**  
So why kill it? Why snuff out something so successful, so respected and so fundamentally enriching?

I've trawled through the relevant government documents and Hansard debates, and come to a depressingly simple conclusion: *money*.

Each IB student costs the state an additional £2,500 – the funding required to cover the extra teaching hours needed for six subjects instead of three. On paper, cutting that looks like a tidy saving. Except it's not.

Around 3,000 students took the IB in 2024, about half of whom came from state schools. For fairness, let's go with a figure of 1,750. Double that for two years of sixth form, and what's the grand total saved by cutting the programme? £6.75 million.

That sounds like a lot, until you realise the DfE's schools budget is over £67 billion. So let's do the maths – that's a saving of 0.01%.

That's the price of excellence, apparently – the cost of giving state school students access to the kind of broad, international education that the world's

top universities and employers value most.

And yet, *this* government, the same one that consistently likes to talk of 'shattering the glass ceiling', has decided that 0.01% is simply too steep a price for a decent pebble.

## Absorbing the cost

So what's the justification? Schools can apparently 'Absorb the cost themselves' – because of course they can. In between plugging SEND gaps, paying supply staff and patching up the roof with duct tape, they've got plenty of money lying around.

Some schools have already given up. Others are hanging on by their fingernails, offering the IB for one more cohort before the axe inevitably falls. Give it a year or two, and it'll vanish entirely from the state sector. This 'gold standard' will become just another independent school luxury and postcode privilege.

Oh, but don't worry. The DfE's spreadsheets will balance, for which – so they'll tell us – we should be grateful. Because we managed to save 0.01%. Because efficiency is the new excellence. Because nothing says 'world class education' like cancelling the one qualification that still tries to educate the whole person.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



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# WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

**Ade Adepitan** recalls how his experiences of early educational software left a lasting impression, and breaks down the learning skills that have served him well as an athlete...

## What can you remember of your experiences at school?

Primary school was cool. Secondary school was more serious – you've got GCSEs to worry about, growing pains, teenage angst and all that stuff. Primary school was just *fun*.

At primary school, it felt like the learning was done in a way that really tried to engage young people. I'm from the generation of schoolkids who saw PCs just starting to come in for the first time. There had been this ancient computer at my school, 'the BBC', which I remember had this game all about the *Mary Rose*.

Everyone was talking about it – it was all over TV, how there was this boat that was being raised after being underwater for hundreds of years. And we had this computer game where you had to locate the *Mary Rose*, excavate it, bring it up safely intact, all of that. It was really basic, but I can still remember learning about the *Mary Rose*, even though it's got to be at least 40 years ago now...

## You recently narrated a KS2 geography-themed game for BBC Bitesize, 'Race Across the Continents' – what can you tell us about it?

It's another example of that 'fun learning'. It's a combination of a quiz and a



competition in which you can watch yourself progress over time. It's one of those games where students will have fun, and at the end it won't feel like they've been in some long, arduous lesson.

It's a great way of learning, because every time the players learn something new, or get a question right, they can see a tangible progression. It can help them feel like they're applying what they've learnt in a practical way.

## Does that side of it appeal to you, as an athlete – that impetus to always see yourself as progressing?

I do love that feeling where every day, and in everything you do, there's always some sense of progression, and a feeling of being rewarded for

hard work or creative thinking. Even when you get a question wrong and see what the correct answer actually was, then you're still learning.

That's part of what you do as an athlete. You learn just as much from your mistakes as you do from those times when you get things right.

One aim of the game is to create winning streaks, which is similar to when I'm playing basketball. You try to get into a rhythm when you're shooting, and if you make two or three shots in a row, you're on a streak and it feels good.

If you then come down, take the right shot but somehow miss it, *that's still the right shot* – it's what we'd call a 'good miss'. And it's much better to have a

'good miss' than to not try at all because you're worried about making a mistake or failing.

It's just like taking a good guess. If there's a question you don't quite know the answer to, try to figure it out logically and you'll at least be in the right ballpark. Having that determination to try and figure stuff out is, I think, almost as important as getting it right.

When I'm practising my shooting on the basketball court, for example, if I miss a shot, I'll look at whether I missed right or missed left. Was I short? Was I long? I'll then correct it, and if I miss again, I'll look closer. Did my arm go slightly off? Did I catch the ball right? I'm constantly figuring out how to correct my mistakes, make tiny little tweaks and come up with different strategies. And even then, a strategy might work well against one team, but not work at all against another. I love all that – it's the game within the game.

## That sounds like a good analogy for life as well...

When you play games like this enough, strategising and learning from your mistakes can soon become second nature. It's not something you have to 'fight' to do, but just something that's within you. It's a lot harder to teach that to older people, but at a younger age, our brains are much more malleable, and more open to that kind of knowledge.

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Department  
for Education

With the proportion of young people affected by obsessive compulsive order growing rapidly, we should be doing more to familiarise ourselves with what the condition actually is, and the forms of support that can genuinely help

# Natasha Devon



A BBC analysis of NHS data conducted in October 2025 revealed a tripling in the number of 16- to 24-year-olds reporting symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) over the past decade.

A number of different factors may have contributed to this rise, increased awareness being one of them. Musician George Ezra opened up about his struggles with the condition in 2020. More recently, *Wednesday* star Jenna Ortega has spoken about her experiences.

It may also be that professionals are getting better at distinguishing OCD from other anxiety disorders after 2017 saw the condition receive its own section in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) – a tome published by the American Psychiatric Association and used by most healthcare specialists as standard.

## Misplaced framing

Whilst OCD shares much in common with anxiety, it is, in fact, a different beast. People tend to focus on the ‘compulsive’ aspect of the illness, because from an outside perspective, that’s how it manifests. What people see is an individual repeatedly washing their hands, switching lights on and off, repeatedly checking doors and appliances – the types of behaviours people have come to associate with the term ‘OCD’.

Over time, however, even this surface level understanding of OCD has become watered down, at least colloquially. You’ll often hear people say ‘I’m a bit OCD’ because they like their desk to be tidy, or because they favour wearing the same coloured socks on a Tuesday.

Yet to frame OCD in this way is to miss the more crucial and debilitating aspect of the disorder, at least from the

point of view of the person experiencing it – the obsessive thoughts.

## A ‘brain under siege’

Experts have described OCD as like having a ‘brain under siege’. People with the condition are subjected to relentless and extremely troubling thoughts – often the worst thing they can possibly imagine about themselves. Author and campaigner Bryony Gordon has written about how her OCD worked to convince her that she was a serial killer, that she was going to harm her daughter and even that she was a paedophile.

Most people will have the occasional intrusive thought. We’ve actually evolved to fleetingly visualise awful things happening to us as a survival mechanism to help us guard against worst case scenarios. The difference with OCD is that those intrusive thoughts can’t be pushed away.

People with OCD lack the ability to switch to thinking about something else when confronted by their own brain’s relentless insistence that they’ve done something terrible – even if, logically, they know that’s not the case. Needless

to say, this quickly becomes extremely distressing. The compulsive behaviours most of us have come to associate with OCD arise as a coping mechanism for, and distraction from, these constant, tormenting thoughts.

## Profound relief

Following the news of OCD’s increasing prevalence, I dedicated part of my LBC show to discussing the misconceptions that still exist around the condition. Like pretty much all forms of mental illness, there are people who still labour under the misapprehension that OCD is ‘attention-seeking behaviour’ that can be ‘cured’ by simply ignoring it. Callers to the programme told me about their frustrations at having their experiences of OCD trivialized, and interactions with some people who even thought it was funny.

The biggest takeaway for me, however, was how the contributors with OCD described the imperviousness of their illness to therapeutic interventions used to treat other mental health conditions. Traditional cognitive behavioural therapy methods, for example, are widely prescribed on the NHS for anxiety and depression, but don’t tend to be as effective in combatting OCD.

Callers told me of their profound relief when they eventually got to see an OCD specialist who genuinely

understood the illness and could prescribe appropriate interventions. Several had found exposure and response prevention therapy to be helpful.

As more young people confront the reality of this cruel and debilitating condition, distinguishing it from anxiety and signposting to specialist services could make all the difference to their outcomes.

Natasha Devon is a writer, broadcaster and campaigner on issues relating to education and mental health; to find out more, visit [natashadevon.com](http://natashadevon.com) or follow @\_NatashaDevon

# SENCos on the Edge

In the first installment, of a two-part feature, **Professor Geoff Baker, Craig Lomas** and **Angela Scott** explain why the existing SENCo model simply isn't working...

**T**he role of the special educational needs co-ordinator has its roots in the 1993 Education Act and the first SEN Code of Practice published in 1994. While the education landscape has changed significantly since then, the core principles for supporting children and young people with learning difficulties have remained remarkably consistent.

The original description of the SENCo's role – as detailed in SEN Code of Practice, paragraph 6.7 – defined it as having responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the school's SEN policy, and for co-ordinating provision for pupils with SEN.

That word, 'co-ordinating', was central. The SENCo was intended to bring people and activities together, so that provision could work smoothly. In essence, the role was imagined as the person at the centre of a web of activity, empowering colleagues to make decisions, take ownership and work collectively toward a shared goal. However, the introduction of the SENCo role has had several unintended consequences, and in some respects, has never quite lived up to its promise.

## Dependency culture

In this two-part article, our aim is to open up the conversation around what the SENCo role could be, helping schools rethink how the position can be understood and used. We want to bring together strategic, big-picture ideas with some practical

suggestions that could make a real difference in day-to-day practice.

Although the SENCo role is essential for promoting inclusive practice and meeting statutory expectations, the current model in many schools is showing real signs of strain. These pressures aren't caused by individual shortcomings, but by wider cultural and structural issues that are pulling the role away from its strategic purpose.

One of the most persistent problems surrounding the role of the SENCo is a dependency culture that exists in many organisations, where responsibility for pupils with SEND falls

unsustainable, at a time when the capacity and confidence of classroom teachers is continuing to narrow: ultimately affecting the life chances of the 1.7 million children with SEND.

## Firefighting as the norm

Research and school feedback suggests that teachers – who we know will often be juggling heavy workloads and lacking confidence in adaptive teaching – can start to view the SENCo as the primary, or even sole owner of SEND provision. This is unrealistic, unsustainable and risks detaching SEND from daily classroom practice. When SEND is

confidence needed to respond to classroom challenges.

We should be aspiring to create truly inclusive classrooms that adapt to the needs of all learners. Confidence gaps run directly counter to this, resulting in lower expectations for certain pupils, increased reliance on TAs and missed opportunities for using adaptive strategies that may benefit all learners. If left unaddressed, inclusive practice can become inconsistent across the school over time.

## “Over-reliance on SENCo expertise limits staff development”

disproportionately on the SENCo. Instead of fostering distributed expertise and shared responsibility, schools have shifted ownership of SEND almost entirely onto their SENCos.

Over the years, this has left some SENCos feeling professionally isolated and overwhelmed, while reducing the confidence, autonomy and problem-solving skills of the wider workforce. When teachers become less inclined to 'own' every learner in their class, the culture of critical thinking that underpins inclusive practice can be weakened.

The end result is that the SENCo role can feel

treated as something 'extra', rather than as a whole-school priority, ownership quickly fades. As a consequence, teachers in many cases may adopt a 'referral' mindset, rather than feel responsible for adapting their teaching in the first instance.

This over-reliance on SENCo expertise also limits staff development. If the SENCo comes to be seen as 'the SEND expert', classroom teachers may invest less time in building their own understanding of areas such as autism spectrum conditions or speech and language needs. This can lead to a workforce that will often feel under-prepared, or lack the



These kinds of pressures can often push SENCos away from their primary strategic focus, compelling them to instead spend much of their time responding to daily operational demands – urgent behaviour issues, parent concerns, last-minute meeting requests, external agency queries and so forth.

Without appropriate support and boundaries in place, this reactive way of working can quickly become exhausting. In 2025, a National Education Union study reported that 74% of secondary SENCos and 66% of primary SENCos struggle to manage their workloads. When firefighting becomes the norm, vital proactive work – developing staff expertise, embedding long-term improvements – can slip inexorably down the priority list.

### Role creep

Another challenge has been steady expansion of the SENCo's remit. While they rightly play a central role in shaping a school's inclusive practice, SENCos are increasingly becoming the point of contact for issues that ought to sit outside of their core responsibilities.

Behaviour incidents, pastoral needs and safeguarding concerns may all intersect with SEND, but none are solely 'SEND matters'. To this 'role creep' we can add a growing administrative burden that encompasses managing Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), organising annual reviews, communicating with various professional bodies and co-ordinating medical or therapeutic input, all of which can consume significant time.

Consequently, SENCos can become something closer to case managers, rather than the leaders of teaching and learning that they should be, diminishing their influence on school improvement in the process.

### Inconsistent authority

There are also inconsistencies in how the SENCo role is positioned across different schools. In some settings, the SENCo will sit as a member of the SLT, contributing directly to big decisions on matters such as curriculum design, resource allocation, and professional development priorities. In these schools, SEND will be woven into strategic thinking.

In other settings the SENCo role may be closer to that of a middle leader, with limited access to senior forums. If the role isn't embedded in leadership structures, that's when SEND risks becoming a reactive service, rather than a driver of improvement. There can also be an over-emphasis on the medical model of SEND, where focus is more on diagnoses and individual deficits, rather than a systemic approach where teaching, environment and the curriculum are adapted to meet diverse needs.

These challenges are then compounded by wider national issues. The ongoing SEND funding crisis has meant that mainstream schools now often lack the resources required to support rising levels of need. Cuts, delays and stretched local services all add to this growing pressure.

At the same time, a severe shortage of special school places has resulted in more children with complex needs remaining in settings that can't fully meet those needs. This in turn creates longer waits for families and increases strain on staff, all while too many pupils are

continuing to go without receiving the support that they need.

### A non-viable role?

These challenges have combined to leave the SENCo role at a critical point. Between limited funding, an often isolated position within school structures, unrealistic workloads and enduring misconceptions over who is meant to be responsible for SEND, many SENCos have come to feel that the role itself is no longer viable.

The government has acknowledged some of these issues by launching a 'national conversation on SEND', which will take the form of nine face-to-face events and five online events aimed at families and sector professionals (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-S1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-S1)). The NEU meanwhile pointedly stated in a July 2025 report that the current system '*Is broken and is failing SEND young people and the professionals working with them*' (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-S2](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-S2)).

Yet there is hope. While many of the current issues do stem from national policy, there's still much that individual leaders, schools and trusts can do to build a more sustainable, effective approach. In the second part of this article, we'll explore what evidence-based strategies can be used to alleviate SENCos' workloads, strengthen whole-school ownership of SEND and restore the role to its originally intended purpose – that of leading an inclusive culture in which every child can thrive.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Professor Geoff Baker is CEO of True Learning Partnership ([truelearning.org.uk](http://truelearning.org.uk)); Craig Lomas is a senior lecturer in education at the University of Greater Manchester; Angela Scott is national lead for SEND at Eastern Leadership ([easternpartnership.co.uk](http://easternpartnership.co.uk))

# The floor is yours

We find out how a new classroom intervention is looking to give girls a louder, more confident voice during classroom debates – and why boys can benefit from what it has to offer, too...



**Bryony Hoskins** is a professor of comparative social science at the

*University of Roehampton and a global authority on citizenship education, and the effects of inequality on political engagement. She also led the research underpinning the Gender Empowerment through Politics in Classrooms (G-EPIC) project – a new intervention aimed at challenging gender inequalities in politics and citizenship education.*

## How did the G-EPIC project originally come about?

My previous research had shown that there's a large gender gap when it comes to having the confidence to talk about politics. Even when controlling for political knowledge, confidence levels among girls in this area tend to be much lower.

Conversely, boys tend to score higher in confidence when engaging with political discussions, despite their actual level of political knowledge being, on average, generally lower.

While difficult to prove statistically, this could be among the reasons as to why we have fewer female political leaders. At the very least, it seems to be a contributing factor as to why women and young women don't engage with formal politics to the same degree – because they often lack comparable levels of confidence in their own knowledge about the topic, or how they believe they'll perform in public.

There was something happening inside classrooms

that was contributing to this lowering of confidence among girls. We felt it important to examine why this was happening, and develop an intervention that could address it.

## What form has the project taken and what resources have come out of it?

The G-EPIC project consists of several different components, one of which involved classrooms observations to try and identify what was going on and why. We got to see, first-hand, how boys dominate classroom discussions that address political areas.

Girls do continue to be more successful at listening and taking notes during classroom discussions, but what they're not doing is taking the floor and building the kind of skills needed for effective political engagement. There's a big performance element to political debate, partly driven by the need to capture the space.

**It's interesting that you identified a distinct, yet under-discussed field of knowledge in which girls are falling behind boys, as that goes against the narrative that girls are consistently achieving better academic outcomes than boys...**

The confidence we saw could be a reason for why men progress faster than women once they're beyond school, in employment and so forth – because in the classroom, they've been able to develop a series of important soft skills that existing exams don't really take account of.

## How did the research you gathered translate into the final intervention?

The intervention was co-constructed with teachers, students' and civil society organisations. We began with six teachers in November 2023 at Roehampton University, where we developed an initial five-lesson programme. We then gathered some feedback from students, who told us what was boring and should be removed, and what they

lessons, structured as follows:

### • Lesson 1 – What is politics?

The main feature of lesson 1 is the 'Diamond 9' activity, where students are given a set of images that can include everything from sanitary products, to photos of border crossings, school classrooms and high profile political figures. The students are then tasked with putting those pictures into a 'diamond 9' indicating which of the areas and issues they illustrate are more or less political.

### • Lesson 2 – How do I fit into politics?

This lesson includes a quiz that gauges students' own political opinions, with no right or wrong answers. After finding out whether their responses suggest they lean more towards the left, right or centre, the students will learn more about the political spectrum.

### • Lesson 3 – How do I create change?

Here, we'll explore counter-narratives in the form of case studies – such as the example of Gina Martin, the young woman who successfully campaigned for upskirting to be made a criminal offence. Her story is an inspirational one that shows how one ordinary young woman was able to bring about significant political change.

This lesson also touches on the topic of period poverty, by examining the campaign to permanently retain a COVID-era government offer of

## **"We got to see, first-hand, how boys dominate classroom discussions that address political areas"**

That's why the intervention we've developed is aimed at helping teachers create safe spaces, and employs inclusive methods to build girls' confidence, so that they can potentially learn how to become the political leaders of the future – whether that's within their local communities, or at a national level.

wanted more of. One thing they asked to see were conversations with MPs on why they first got involved in politics, so we recorded some interviews with sitting MPs and added those.

## What would delivering the intervention look like in practice?

The main G-EPIC programme consists of five distinct

making free sanitary towels available through schools.

• **Lesson 4 – How do we create change?**

Working in groups, students choose from a range of awareness-raising campaigns relating to gender, ethnicity, the pay gap, diversity in English literature or period poverty. They then get to decide how to conduct their campaign – should they opt for social media messaging? Write to MPs? Mount a protest?

• **Lesson 5 – What do we plan to change?**

Each group delivers a presentation that details their campaign strategy, explaining what they've chosen to do, their reasoning, and why the issue is an important one. The lesson concludes with a classroom vote on which of the presentations was the most convincing and powerful.

**How are you expecting schools to go about teaching those lessons?**

We deliberately built inclusive teaching methods into all five of the lessons, which include working on tasks in small groups of up to four, and rotating the groups' leadership roles from one lesson to the next.

These strategies afford students the space and opportunity to speak freely, try out different ideas and gather feedback from peers, prior to taking part in an all-class discussion.

The use of counter-narratives, meanwhile, is intended to disrupt existing power dynamics by showing how disadvantaged women have been able to create political change, in ways that may inspire girls today to harbour similar ambitions of their own.

**Is G-EPIC conceived as an intervention primarily for disadvantaged students, or could potentially benefit all students?**

The intervention can be rolled out in any school, but we targeted it

primarily at schools in challenging areas and disadvantaged girls, since they have the biggest need. We wanted to check find out if it would work for those who needed it most.

You could certainly run the G-EPIC lessons in very different contexts, and observe similar boosts confidence levels among the least disadvantaged cohorts – but those settings will likely be running similar classes and projects of their own already.

**Were there any moments or discoveries during the project's development and trialling process that surprised you?**

In the pilot phase, we were alarmed to observe that some boys were still undermining girls during the delivery of presentations in lesson 5. That prompted us to add a set of behavioural expectations to the intervention and do more to reward active listening. Participants now hear specific messages at the start about the importance of listening respectfully to their peers, noting down any questions they wish to ask and putting their hands up only after presentations have ended.

**Where does the G-EPIC project now go from here?**

So far, we've produced a freely downloadable toolkit for teachers, a student resource book and a PowerPoint presentation. We've also been recruiting

## VOTES AT 16

*With 16-year-olds soon able to vote in elections, what impact will that have on adolescents' level of interest and engagement in politics? Professor Hoskins shares her thoughts...*

In the absence of any extra efforts aimed at supporting young people's political education and citizenship education up to 16, the most likely outcome will be a further increase in inequalities. It will only be those teens from the most politically engaged families and advantaged backgrounds who actually turn up at the ballot box.

The ultimate aim of providing inclusive citizenship education within schools is to give disadvantaged students the chance to develop similar levels of awareness and engagement, so that it's not just 'elite' 16- to 18-year-olds who make up the youth vote. It will be great for adolescents to have the vote at 16, but they'll all need the knowledge, skills and confidence in themselves to know that their vote can make a difference.

teachers to deliver the intervention in UK schools, and have made plans to hand over all responsibility for long-term maintenance and distribution of the G-EPIC materials to the Association of Citizenship Teachers.

The research has been done – it's now just a case of getting this knowledge out into the field.

The G-EPIC toolkits for teachers can be downloaded from [g-epic.eu/toolkits](http://g-epic.eu/toolkits)

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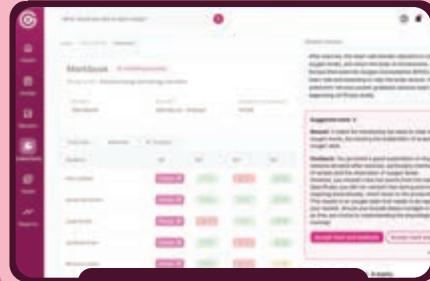
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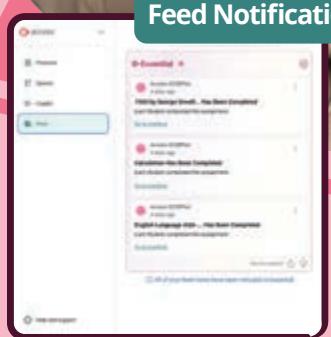
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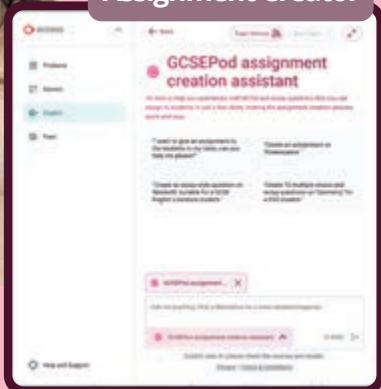
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# THE TS GUIDE TO... GCSEs

Whether it's helping students manage their stress responses while ensuring they're supported at home, or seeing to it that neurodivergent students aren't placed at a disadvantage in the exam hall, the preparations ahead of exams season can be a complex and challenging affair...

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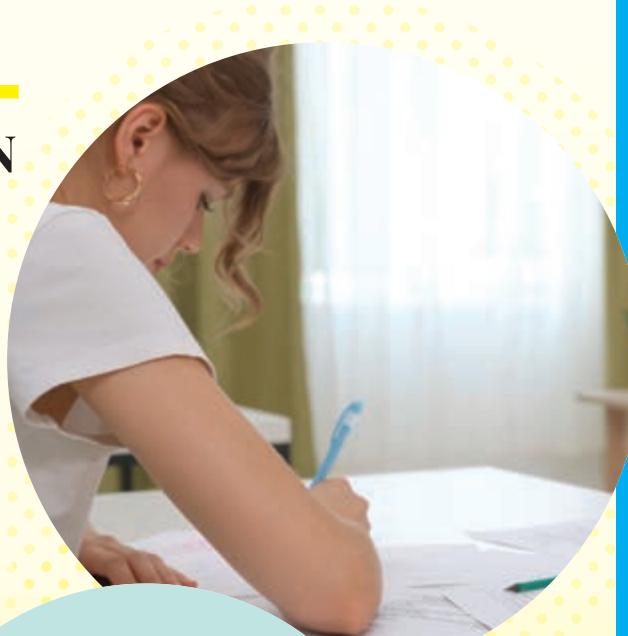
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Asmaa Ahmed explains why reasonable adjustments for GCSE exams depend on more than compliance alone...



## IN FIGURES:

### WHAT WERE THE HEADLINE NUMBERS FOR 2025?

# 67.4%

The proportion of grades earned by all GCSE entrants in 2025 that were level 4 or above (down from 67.6% in 2024)

# 71.5%

The 2025 pass rate of GCSE entrants in Greater London – the highest-scoring county in the country; the lowest pass rate was recorded in the Isle of Wight (57.9%)

# 6.2

The percentage point gap between the 2025 GCSE pass rate of boys (64.3%) compared to girls (70.5%) – the lowest recorded since 2000

Source: Ofqual

# 3

TEACHWIRE ARTICLES FROM THE ARCHIVES

### READ THE QUESTION!

It's the one piece of exam advice that every teacher seems to agree on – but Adam Boxer reckons we've got it back to front...

[tinyurl.com/151special1](http://tinyurl.com/151special1)

### "YOU MAY NOW COMMENCE TYPING..."

Today's students have grown up with keyboards and tablets, says Guy Snape, so could it be time to let them put their pens down during exams?

[tinyurl.com/151special2](http://tinyurl.com/151special2)

### BETTER USES FOR PAST PAPERS

Claire Gadsby serves up some ideas for developing a revision diet that's less reliant on drilling and completing exams from yesteryear...

[tinyurl.com/151special3](http://tinyurl.com/151special3)

# Keep the stress at bay

**Katharine Radice** shares with us her advice on what schools can do to help their Y11 students navigate the crucial final year of their schooling...

## IN THE CLASSROOM

### 1. Focus on the now – the rest comes later

When teaching Y11s in September, should we be highlighting what they need to think about now, while simultaneously telling them about what they should keep an eye on in six to eight months' time?

There's a difference between teaching to the test and *talking* to the test – do we really have to mention exams as much as we do? The more we encourage students to think about both what's important today *and* this unknown future, the more unmanageable their preparations will likely start to feel.

### 2. Students have less time than you think

A fundamental difficulty when revising for GCSEs is the lack of time. If you were to calculate the number of revision hours available to our students, factoring in weekends and holidays, and divide that by the eight to ten subjects most students will be taking, you'll quickly see just how limited their time really is.

A big challenge for Y11s is how many revision resources are available to them, but they don't have any more time to sift through them than previous generations of students. This can make devising a revision plan actually harder, since deciding what they're *not* going to do has now become as important as deciding what they *are* going to do.

That's why it can be helpful for students to talk through their priorities with you in a way that's realistically calibrated to how much time they have:

*'Miss, I've got 2 hours to revise this topic, so I thought I'd do [X] – is that sensible?'*

### 3. Be mindful of other subject demands

Teachers need to consider, realistically, how much time students have to revise their subject, and when that revision will get done. If you stop and really think about how many hours students will be able to dedicate to revising your subject over, say, the Easter break, you'll likely find yourself shocked at just how small that number actually is.

Again, remember that students have far less time to revise than we, as teachers, often realise. That can lead to gaps between what teachers believe their students *can* do, and the reality of what's going to be *possible* for them to do. The bigger those gaps become, the higher students' stress levels will be.

### 4. Use past papers strategically

Past papers can make exams feel more familiar and less intimidating, and are essential for developing exam technique. That said, completing past papers is a summative task that requires students to practise using knowledge – they're not necessarily the best way of *building* that knowledge.

Come the day of the exam, students will need to have been working with past papers for a certain amount of time, but that doesn't necessarily mean they should be using them from the start

of Y11. Introduce them too early, before students have the knowledge and skills needed to properly access the questions, and you run the risk of making the exam seem more complicated and difficult than it actually is.

## WHOLE SCHOOL

### 1. Emphasise that stress responses are natural

When we talk about exam stress in school more generally, many students can lapse into thinking that it's possible to experience no stress at all, or dwell on the stress they're feeling to the point that it becomes unmanageable and overwhelming.

The sweet spot is for students to adopt a healthy, realistic perspective of what's

normal and natural for them to be experiencing. We should acknowledge that it's natural to feel slightly queasy when an exam's about to start, or to have difficulty

sleeping well the night before. Accepting this can help us develop workable strategies for dealing

with that stress when it presents itself.

### 2. Celebrate with care

There's a place for celebrating great work at a school-wide level – students' GCSE art displays being an obvious example – but we should also remember that the purpose of exams is to divide and rank students according to the perceived quality of their work.

If your school only celebrates your students' very best work, you're establishing a specific quality marker against which everyone will feel encouraged

**"Students have far less time to revise than we, as teachers, often realise"**



to judge their own work – and how far it is from meeting that standard.

As adults, we know that how good someone is at maths doesn't define them as a person. And yet, right now, your Y11s are being graded and marked on their performance in different subjects via methods that are quantified and highly visible – but which won't be used to measure, for example, their kindness or resilience. So even when exams are looming, make sure there's some celebration of school-based achievements that aren't just related to grades.

### 3. Peer interactions

Often, the advice students value most will tend to come from their peers. Make room for your Y11s (and Y12s, if applicable) to share how they've managed the revision

process themselves. What are *their* tips on how to take restorative breaks? How did *they* set themselves manageable targets?

Staff will want to review and check the advice given first, of course – but that kind of wisdom can be really helpful for students to hear from others who have gone through it themselves.

### AT HOME

#### 1. Children can tell us what they need

When working with parents on issues relating to exam stress, I've often said that the best advice they can get on how to support their child will come from the child themselves – because they're the ones actually living it.

Parents should understand that their role isn't to just 'support their child's revision', but to help them with the process of managing medium- to

low-level stress over time. This means making sure their child gets enough rest and has things to look forward to – it's unhealthy for a child to be thinking about exams all the time. Parents also need to be alert for acute stress, know how to help their child with this, and where to go for professional medical / therapeutic support if it's needed.

#### 2. Familiarise parents with the process

Staff in schools are now much more alert and attentive to following up on serious wellbeing concerns than in years gone by, and should be justly proud of their work in this area. Another area that perhaps needs to be thought about more, however, is what schools can do to help parents understand what the GCSE process involves.

Staff can be naturally wary of transgressing onto 'telling parents how to parent', but bear in mind that secondary schooling can often be virtually invisible to most parents. Partly because most teens don't want to talk about school at home, but also because parents' perceptions can be distorted by memories of their own schooldays. Some parents may have attended the very same school as their child, been taught in the same buildings and sat exams in same subjects – but the exam experience for a Y11 today will be radically different from that of 20 or 30 years ago. If schools don't help parents understand what it's like today, it becomes harder for them to know how they can help.

#### 3. Schools are limited in what they can do

Many schools now offer webinars or after-school presentations aimed at informing

### WHEN EXAM ROOM STRESS HITS...

- ▶ Remember that acute stress is a fear response, which means that your body's physical response must be calmed down in order to free up time and space for clarity of thought.
- ▶ Deep breathing is hugely effective for calming the body's physical response
- ▶ There are useful phrases you can recite (quietly or silently) to reassure yourself that you're fine, that you're safe, and that this will pass.

parents about the procedures and processes surrounding exams. Whatever parental communication method you use, be aware that there's real value in thinking about what parents need to understand, and what they presently might not.

Different teenagers will go through school with wildly differing levels of parental support, which itself may be highly variable in terms of how effective it is. Schools can't simply wave a magic wand and have every parent do as every parent should – but the more clearly a school can describe what effective support looks like, the easier it will be for parents to move in that direction.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katharine Radice is an author, teacher and education consultant, currently teaching part-time at both a mixed ability comprehensive school and at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, and regularly runs workshops for students, teachers and parents on exam stress; her new book, *The Parents' Guide to Exam Stress*, is due for publication in March 2026



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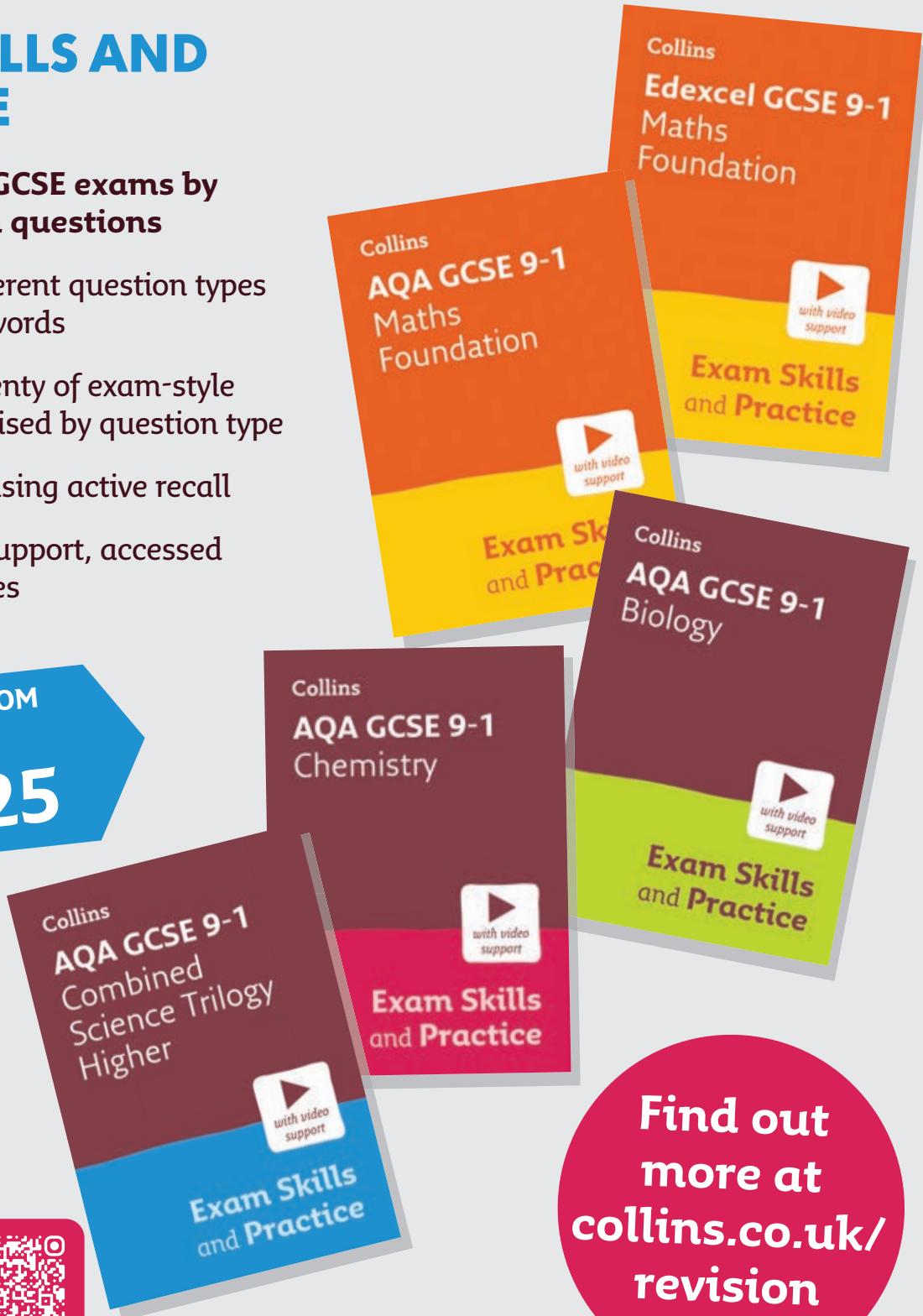
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# Answer me this

**Sam Holyman** outlines her favoured approach for helping students get better at tackling exam questions...

**W**hen I was at school, I'd enjoy my lessons and usually feel like I'd learned something new. But then, when I settled down to do my homework – usually an exam question – I often had no idea what it was asking, let alone how to go about trying to craft an answer.

Fast forward more than a quarter of a century (yes, I'm that old), I'm now a teacher and see this same problem play out time and time again. We have a fantastic lesson, and I'm confident that the students 'get it'. So why can't they seem to even begin the exam questions?

When we go through how to start, the response is usually a retort of '*Is that it?*' or '*Oh, I can do that*' – but then comes the next question, and it's met with the same reactions and blank faces, with no one even attempting to start tackling it. Argh!

## Modelling the approach

I've come to realise that simply assigning exam questions for homework removes 'the expert' from the room. Instead, we can build confidence and encourage learners more by giving them the courage to try in the classroom.

I've moved to explicitly modelling how to answer exam questions during lessons, often starting one as a plenary and encouraging students to complete it by the end of the lesson. This approach lets me break down the process and provide students with a clear framework to scaffold their responses.

A common issue is that students will rush straight to



the question without first reading the rubric or introduction. The rubric is often a goldmine of information that can help students focus on the key topic, or even provide details they can use in their answer. I'll read the rubric aloud and ask students to identify the information it gives us. Using a visualiser, I may annotate it with the specification reference or topic name to help them refer back later.

## Unpicking exam questions

Students can also often not understand command words or subject-specific vocabulary – and if you don't understand the language of the question, you won't even begin to grasp what it's asking, be able to identify the relevant topic or start crafting an answer.

The second part of my technique is to therefore box all the command words in the question. Using a visualiser, we'll discuss these as a class and complete the activity together. We'll then annotate the meaning of each command word using the

examination board's subject-specific command word list. This ensures that students recognise what the examiner will be expecting from their answers.

Finally, I read the question again, this time asking students to identify any subject-specific words. I underline these words using the visualiser, and with the help of a glossary or further class discussion, annotate their definitions directly onto the exam question.

Only then do I allow students to tackle the question. I'll sometimes encourage small groups to work together to support each other's learning, setting a time limit and allowing them to use their lesson notes and peers for support. I then reveal the mark scheme and encourage students to assess their own work. Once they've completed this self-assessment, they show me how many marks they believe they achieved using their fingers. This quick check helps me gauge the class' understanding and decide whether further work on the

topic will be needed or not.

Using this technique, I've seen students grow in confidence, gain clarity as to what examiners want and better understand what the question is asking.

## Focus on command words

We'll frequently use exam questions to illustrate how lesson content is assessed, but in Y11, I'll shift focus to the looming exams themselves.

Understanding the requirements of command words is crucial for crafting succinct answers that maximise marks. My Y11 starter activities will therefore often concern the 'command word' – unpicking what the term means, and illustrating this with an appropriate exam question.

These starters serve as warm-ups and retrieval practice, keeping past learning alive while honing students' exam technique and building confidence.

Since adopting this approach of breaking down exam questions and focusing on key words, I've noticed a real shift in my students. They're more willing to attempt questions when armed with a framework for approaching them – and the more they try, the more progress they make.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sam Holyman is lead practitioner of science across the Sidney Stringer Multi Academy Trust and author of multiple bestselling science textbooks, including entries in Collins' A-level *Organise and Retrieve your Knowledge* series

# Doing the right thing

**Asmaa Ahmed** explains why reasonable adjustments for GCSE exams depend on more than compliance alone...

**H**alfway through last summer's exams season, a SENCo told me she'd found a Y11 student sitting on the floor of a corridor, clutching their exam paper like it might explode. Their allocated 'small-group room' had quietly grown from six students to twelve. The invigilator had changed at the last minute, and the fluorescent lights were buzzing louder than usual. The student had simply frozen. "*I know I'm meant to do the right thing for them,*" the SENCo said, "*but on days like this, the system feels held together with duct tape.*"

Most colleagues who have been anywhere near access arrangements will know the feeling. Schools *want* to do the right thing. They know what the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) and Equality Act demand. They care deeply about fairness. Yet come May and June, those ideals around ensuring equitable access for all collide with the very real limits of space, staffing and time.

## Intent versus reality

Every school leader I speak with says that they're determined to avoid putting disabled students at a disadvantage in exams. The trouble is, this stated commitment doesn't automatically translate into enough rooms, trained adults or hours in the day. A mid-sized cohort might include dozens of students requiring readers, scribes,

supervised rest breaks or separate spaces. Multiply that by overlapping timetables, and you'll swiftly start to understand why exams officers age faster than the rest of us.

The issue isn't just one of capacity; it's timing. Some schools begin identifying students for access arrangements early, collecting evidence from Y9 onwards so that students have time to practise adjustments until they feel routine. Others don't start soon enough. When identification occurs too late, students end up being handed arrangements

work well, students feel the benefit long before they ever set foot in the exam hall. Their adjustments end up forming part of their 'normal way of working.' Extra time doesn't come as a surprise. Rest breaks don't feel awkward. The laptop they use in the exam hall is the same one they've used in English for months.

The best schools will go beyond the rulebook and think about sensory load, predictability and emotional safety.

Many students with ASD, anxiety or trauma histories cope best in calm, low-stimulus environments.

adult can make all the difference between a student spiralling and one who recovers enough to continue.

## The logistical mountain

Some schools offer walkthroughs or visual guides, so that students can picture the experience before it happens. I've previously had a SENCo tell me that she invites anxious students to practise opening the exam paper, filling in the front cover and even hearing the invigilator's script ahead of time. "*If we can shrink the unknowns,*" she said, "*we shrink the fear.*"

Behind the scenes, exam access tends to be something of an operational jigsaw involving SEND, pastoral teams, safeguarding personnel, subject teams and SLT members. When things goes wrong, it's rarely because someone doesn't care. More often, it'll be because the system relies on a chain of humans working under pressure.

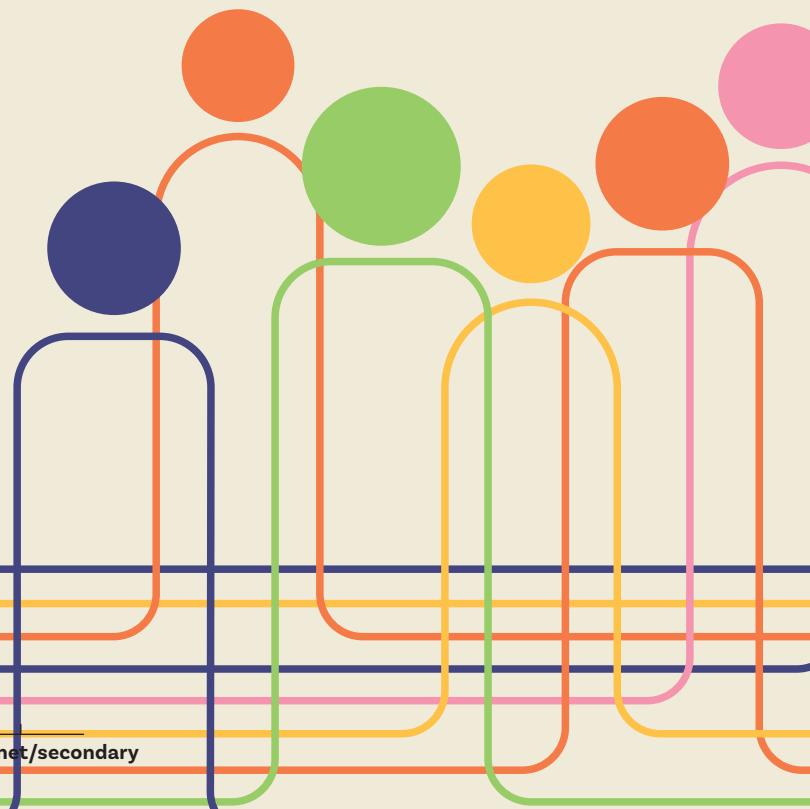
## "The quietest room in the school is the one that holds the most fear"

they've barely rehearsed. It's like giving a violinist new notation on the morning of a concert.

Consistency matters just as much as timeliness. Anyone who's ever watched a nervous student enter a mock exam knows how fragile their confidence can be. When mocks don't mirror the real thing, students are left with no chance to test the environment, or work out what to do when anxiety hits. A mismatch between mock and final arrangements can undermine all the preparation in the world.

**What do 'good adjustments' look like?**  
When access arrangements

They need clarity around the room they'll be in, who will support them and what happens if they feel overwhelmed. A familiar



Schools are constantly wrestling with staff shortages and competing timetables. Clashes pile up. Appropriate rooms vanish just as quickly as they're booked, and while invigilators are expected to uphold exam integrity, many receive little training on specific SEND profiles. That lack of preparation can lead to inconsistent experiences and, in a few cases, distress for those students who already associate tests with feelings of panic.

Communication breakdowns are common, too. Who collects which student? Which adult knows the student's anxiety triggers? Who checks that the reader is assigned to the correct candidate, and not the identical twin sat in the next room? When there are dozens of moving parts, the margin for error increases.

### Exams are OUR job

Meanwhile, the JCQ tweaks something every year – and even small changes can upend workflows schools have spent months refining.

The most successful exam seasons have one factor in common, that being *shared responsibility*. When SEND

and exam officers are left to carry everything, the strain soon starts to show. But when schools bring multiple teams together early, the culture shifts.

Pre-season planning meetings will help everyone understand what the cohort needs. Centralising staff deployment should help prevent sudden scrambles for warm bodies. Some schools run consistent training for their invigilators and support staff so that expectations are made clear. Post-mocks debriefs serve to highlight where things went wrong and what still needs adjusting.

One of the most effective approaches I've seen is assigning key adults to the most vulnerable students. Those adults aren't there to 'bend the rules', but to provide emotional safety and intercept problems before they escalate.

### Listen to students, change the game

If the process of planning exams feels out of control for us adults, just imagine how they must seem to students with anxiety, or traits associated with pathological demand avoidance. A ceding of control for these

students, even in small ways, can make a real difference.

Some schools help students devise simple, one-page '*What helps me in exams*' profiles that outline what triggers their stress, what helps them recover and anything else other adults need to know. Staff then have clear guidance without having to resort to guesswork.

However supportive the adults are though, levels of fairness depend on consistency. Students shouldn't have drastically different exam experiences just because one invigilator is confident with SEND and another isn't. And as many teachers know, students can *sometimes* mask their distress so well that their needs are missed entirely.

Regular monitoring, check-ins and maintenance of communication channels with families will help to catch those students who might otherwise slip through the cracks unnoticed.

### Emotional and academic readiness

The support available doesn't have to stop at logistics. SEND students will often need scaffolded approaches to revision and retrieval practice, and usually benefit from predictable routines and structured tasks. When schools model what good preparation looks like and break down expectations, students can arrive for their exams with not just with the right adjustments, but a sense of *readiness*.

Digital platforms, such as Access GCSEPod, can

support this kind of retrieval and confidence-building, but only when woven into a broader strategy, rather than handed to students as a standalone fix. They work best when teachers use them to reinforce routines that students already know, rather than when adding yet another unknown to an already stressful landscape.

A fair exam experience is possible, but only if we treat that as a collective promise. One message expressed repeatedly by SEND leads is that *fairness requires forethought*. When adjustments are identified early; when training is regular; when communications are kept clear; and when mock exams are used to stress-test systems – *students feel the difference*.

Access isn't about loopholes or box-ticking; it's about dignity. It's about making sure that every student, regardless of need, can walk into their GCSE exams believing that the system hasn't already decided their chances.

And, perhaps most importantly – it's about remembering that for some young people, the quietest room in the school is the one that holds the most fear. Our job is to make that room feel a little less hostile.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Asmaa Ahmed is a former teacher and mental health lead, now senior customer success manager at The Access Group, working with schools across the UK on the adoption and implementation of evidence-based strategies that improve student outcomes while reducing operational strain for staff; for more information, visit [theaccessgroup.com](http://theaccessgroup.com)

# We all make MISTAKES

Teachers sometimes say it 'doesn't matter' if students are wrong, but that might not be a helpful message to send, cautions **Colin Foster**...

**I**n the bad old days, school students would be punished or shamed for making mistakes. Students wouldn't speak up in class for fear of being mocked – not just by their peers, but by the *teacher* if what they said was incorrect.

With students afraid of getting things wrong, misunderstandings and misconceptions ended up being buried, in the hope that no one would ever discover them. That's certainly not an environment conducive to learning, let alone positive wellbeing.

#### Positive messaging

So, how are things looking now, in the modern classroom? Thankfully, teachers no longer consider it acceptable to humiliate

rebuked if they slip up. All of this is good, contributing to a 'positive error culture' that in turn produces classroom environments where learning is prioritised and students – we hope – want to be.

At the same time, however, I believe there are occasions when this positive messaging can go slightly wrong.

I've often heard teachers tell their class, '*It doesn't matter if you're wrong*' – which for me, isn't quite the message that's likely to be most helpful. The teacher is trying to coax responses from possibly reluctant students, and reassure them that a wrong answer isn't the end of the world.

The teacher here just wants them to *have a go* and take the risk of making a mistake. They (rightly) want

Getting something wrong is what happens just before you learn something. A mistake is therefore an exciting moment – it's the cue that means you're about to learn something. The mistake isn't good in itself, but it can be the basis for something good that later comes out of it.

#### Wanting to be right

The reason this matters is that young people generally do want to be right. In fact, young children can often be especially pedantic, and love correcting tiny errors in what adults say – even when it's debatable whether something's actually an error at all: "*Can you pick up your coat, please?*" "*It isn't a coat, it's a jacket!*" Young people want to know what's what, and it's good that they care about being right or wrong.

It's a short step from '*It doesn't matter if you're wrong*' to simply thinking '*It doesn't matter*'. It's like playing tennis without a net – if it doesn't matter when you're wrong, then presumably it doesn't matter when you're right. Why are we even bothering with school, if being wrong is no problem?

The point is that it does

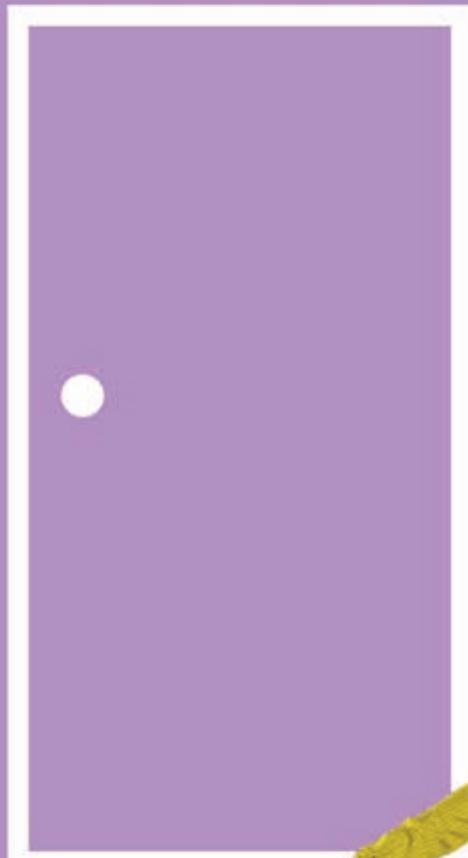
**"A mistake is an exciting moment – it's the cue that means you're about to learn something"**

students or belittle them for their mistakes. Instead, we've come to see mistakes as an entirely natural part of the learning process.

We want to value what students say, even when they are incorrect, because it's by talking about difficulties and bringing them out into the open that we all move forward. Students are encouraged to always 'have a go', and not fear being

to get around the students' natural fear of failure, but I think the messaging around achieving these important goals matters.

It isn't so much that it 'doesn't matter' if someone's wrong, because if that were true, mistakes would have no value. The point is that *being wrong is an opportunity to learn* – and perhaps a better opportunity to learn than when someone is right!





matter when someone's wrong, which is why a teacher won't just leave mistakes hanging in the air. The teacher will instead pick up on the error, explore and develop what's been said, and then help everyone learn more from it.

If, for example, a student says that a billion is ten times as big as a million, the teacher won't simply say "*Well, that's wrong, but it doesn't matter*". It does, of course, matter that the students understand why this is wrong, and that a billion is, in fact, a *thousand* times as big as a million. It's okay to be wrong sometimes – as we all are – provided we take the opportunity to *learn from our mistake*.

Yes, it is okay to make mistakes, but we should try to make each mistake less and less often. Next time round, we want to get that thing right. Because being right does matter.

### Post-truth

At the moment, it feels as though we're in something of a post-truth climate. Who and what can young people trust today? Social media lets them very quickly and easily find communities of people with strange, and often disturbing views about things. If those communities have hundreds of followers, then it can seem like lots of other people think the same way once you're inside them – even if that's just a partial view of what's actually a tiny minority of the population.

Before the online era, people with strange and fringe views would often find it very difficult to find fellow travellers who shared those views, and have little hope of persuading others to join them. In the present day, anyone can now find any view on virtually any topic, theme or event well-represented somewhere. Under this system, everything that some individuals see will be true *for them*. The logical

endpoint of this is that we can never really know what's right or wrong.

Young people today could thus be forgiven for despairing that it doesn't matter if you're wrong, because we can't know who's wrong and who's right, anyway. Who knows, maybe *everybody's wrong*?

It's because of this that I think now is the time for teachers to reassure students that facts very much *are* a thing; that some things are true and some simply aren't, no matter who might be saying them. We want young people to grow up with the confidence to care about what's correct and what isn't. We want them to be empowered to talk back to online videos and podcasts that make false claims.

It isn't okay to repeatedly propagate misinformation or 'alternative facts' while insisting that doing so doesn't matter. At the same time, it's perfectly normal and fine to get things wrong – just so long as it's part of a journey towards trying to understand things better.

How much you know is one thing. Whether you're correctable, and therefore getting more things right more of the time as you go on, is far more important. Being on an upwards curve towards a greater truth is what education is all about. We won't be right all of the time, but if we take our mistakes seriously, we'll be more right tomorrow than we were today.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

# Revolution? No. RESET? YES.

**Andy McHugh** surveys the implications of the Curriculum and Assessment Review for classroom teachers...

**A**fter more than a decade without major reform, England's curriculum and assessment system has finally been placed under the microscope. Professor Becky Francis' long-running Curriculum and Assessment Review has now concluded, and with it comes an answer to the question many teachers have been asking. *'Is this the moment when everything changes...?'*

The short answer is – no. It doesn't mark a dramatic rupture with the teaching priorities of the past decade. GCSEs and A Levels remain. The broad structure of Key Stages remains too, but that doesn't mean that *nothing* is changing.

Instead, the review sets out a careful recalibration of the system. It is evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, aiming to widen what counts as valuable learning, ease some assessment pressure and rebalance accountability, without dismantling the entire system.

## Broadening the curriculum

For classroom teachers, this means the impact will be gradual, rather than immediate. Nothing will change overnight, but the direction of travel is clear over the next five to 10 years, and it's likely to reshape what's taught, how those things are taught, and what schools will feel able to prioritise.

At the heart of the review is a concern that while

standards have risen, the benefits haven't been shared evenly. Disadvantaged pupils continue to lag behind their peers, and too many young people are leaving education without the knowledge and skills they need for life beyond school.

The response has been not to scrap the National Curriculum, but to refresh it. Programmes of study will be updated to ensure they're ambitious, current and better balanced. Media literacy, financial education

it clear that relevance and representation aren't just optional extras.

## Taking centre stage

The Review's proposal for a 'digital curriculum framework' further supports this approach. In place of the static documents used up to now, teachers would be able to see connections between subjects and add their own enrichment materials. In theory, this could make planning more coherent and flexible. In practice, careful

carefully, challenge viewpoints and participate in discussion underpins success across the curriculum and beyond. For many teachers, this will feel more like a validation of approaches they already value than a radical departure.

## Providing stability

In terms of assessment, things stay familiar, but become slightly lighter. The review treads carefully here, with no proposals for a wholesale move away from exams. GCSEs and A levels will be retained, on the basis that externally set and marked assessments are still seen as the fairest way to assess essential knowledge. There are some signs of softening around the edges, however, with exam content set to be reduced by around 10%, in order to free up teaching time and ease pressure on students.

That said, the Review also calls for a new, compulsory diagnostic reading test in

## "The exam-driven system remains intact, but slightly less crowded than before"

and climate science will all be given greater prominence, reflecting the realities that pupils now face outside of the classroom.

Moreover, these themes are intended to be woven across different subjects, rather than confined to discrete lessons and one-off projects.

## A different view

The Review also marks a notable shift in how the curriculum itself is framed. The Review explicitly stated that the National Curriculum should be seen as a *minimum entitlement*, rather than as a finished product.

Schools will thus be encouraged to enrich and adapt content, so that their pupils can encounter a broader range of histories, cultures and perspectives.

This step would legitimise work that many schools are doing already, while making

implementation will be needed to avoid adding to teachers' workloads and creating inconsistencies between what different schools are teaching..

## Speaking up

One of the Review's most striking features is its renewed emphasis on oracy, and how it positions speaking and listening alongside reading and writing as core foundations for learning and participation. There's a proposal for a new national oracy framework to sit alongside existing literacy frameworks, so that a combined oracy, reading and writing framework operates across all secondary schools.

This reflects a growing recognition throughout the profession that pupils need more than subject knowledge alone. The ability to articulate ideas, listen

Y8, in order to identify gaps and support interventions early on. While this is not intended as a high-stakes accountability measure, it will inevitably shape how schools think about literacy beyond primary school.

The main takeaway in all this is that the exam-driven system remains intact, but slightly less crowded than before. For teachers hoping for a radical rethink of assessment, this may feel overly cautious. Others might see it more generously as a way of providing a little more stability for everyone, while simultaneously acknowledging some of the system's excesses.

### Accountability, subject choice and the end of the EBacc

A more significant shift can be seen in the area of accountability. The review recommends scrapping the EBacc performance measure, arguing that it's constrained subject choice and narrowed the curriculum, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.

Instead, we would see a redesigned Progress 8 and Attainment 8. English and maths would remain double-weighted, with science gaining two dedicated slots. Four remaining slots will be reserved for a broader mix of subjects, so as to encourage

breadth and parity between academic, creative and technical disciplines. This wouldn't remove much existing pressure from core subjects, but it does send the signal that arts, humanities and vocational options *matter*.

There's also a new entitlement for pupils to study triple science, alongside proposals for a broader computing GCSE and new qualifications that could address the areas of data science and AI.

For schools, these changes may gradually reshape option blocks and timetables, but they also raise familiar challenges around staffing, specialist expertise and funding – particularly in shortage subjects.

### Post-16 pathways

Beyond 16, the review presents a vision of more a simplified post-school landscape. New vocational 'V Levels' would sit alongside existing A levels and T levels, with clearer Level 1 and Level 2 pathways designed to reduce repeat GCSE resits in English and maths.

The intention is to widen participation, while creating routes that better reflect pupils' needs and aspirations. For colleges and schools with sixth forms, this signals the need for long-

term planning, further investment in staff expertise, and closer collaboration with local employers.

These proposed reforms are ambitious, but they're also phased. The first V Levels would only start to be taught in 2027, with full rollout not expected until the early 2030s.

### What schools can do now

In the short term, schools will continue to teach the existing curriculum and work within current assessment arrangements – there's no need for immediate structural change. That said, the direction of travel is unmistakable, so there are some practical steps schools can begin to consider now.

Strengthening oracy through more structured discussion, debate and presentation work is one. Reviewing enrichment provision in arts, sport and civic engagement is another. Schools may also want to reflect on how well they currently support literacy beyond KS2, in light of those proposed Y8 diagnostic tests.

Crucially, the Review puts a strong emphasis on consultation and teacher involvement. Draft programmes of study will be released for feedback, with schools that engage early better placed to influence and prepare for change when the time comes.

### A moment of possibility

The Curriculum and Assessment Review ultimately offers a measured reset, rather than a dramatic overhaul. It broadens the curriculum, elevates oracy and enrichment, and slightly lightens assessment, while leaving the exam system largely intact.

Whether this leads to meaningful change in classrooms will depend less on the Review itself,

## THE PRIMARY PICTURE

**Two proposed KS1/2 changes that may have lasting effects when learners enter KS3/4...**

► Citizenship education will receive a boost, becoming statutory from KS1. Pupils will learn about democracy, law, rights, climate education and financial literacy from an earlier age, which could have a noticeable impact on classroom practice over time

► The Review proposes replacing the KS2 grammar, punctuation and spelling test with an assessment focused on pupils' ability to 'use grammar in context', rather than their aptitude at recalling technical terminology.

and more on how it is implemented. The risk is that accountability pressures simply shift elsewhere, rather than diminishing.

The main opportunity is that schools may feel genuinely empowered to broaden and deepen what their pupils experience.

For teachers, the message is clear. This isn't a moment of disruption, but one of *possibility*. The years leading up to 2028 will certainly matter – and how the profession responds may ultimately determine whether this Review becomes a footnote or a turning point.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy McHugh (@andymchugh.bsky.social) is a head of RE and the founder of Teacher Writers (@teacherwriters.bsky.social) – a service that supports teachers wanting to write professionally or just for fun

# A NEW CHAPTER

As the government prepares to roll out new statutory reading assessments for Y8, **Meera Chudasama** highlights some effective ways of supporting students who struggle to engage with books...

**T**he government recently announced plans to have all Y8 students sit reading tests to 'Drive up standards' on reading. Should the plans go ahead, it will present secondary schools with the challenge of how to make reading appeal to *all* students, and ensure that they're able to access a range of texts that they're all able and willing to engage with.

Whilst many have argued that these proposed reading tests will generate yet more work for teachers, they will at least give teaching professionals – not to mention parents/guardians and carers – valuable reading data that can be used to support a child's reading journey.

## A toolbox of strategies

As things stand, secondary schools across the country are already working tirelessly with a whole toolbox of different reading strategies – from reading challenges and tutor reading programmes, to interventions aimed at addressing phonics gaps.

It should be noted that this has largely been driven by a rise in students who struggle to decode and deduce meaning from the written word. Whether due to households with relatively low levels of literacy, or simply a lack of interest in reading on the part of young people, secondary teachers are increasingly encountering students unable to read subject-specific content.

For that reason, I want to share here some 'small win strategies' that you can use, enhance and potentially

adapt for any struggling readers in your classroom. I will also detail some whole school strategies you can start actioning now, so that you'll be better placed to support your students if and when the government's mooted reading assessments are introduced.

### Get to the library!

My first recommendation is to get familiar with your school library. Your school librarian will have a huge pool of knowledge with regards to fiction and non-fiction books suited to any topic, module or subject you might be teaching. So book some time in your school's library space and design a suitable 'library lesson'. Here are some potential ideas to get you started.

### Non-fiction investigation

Assign students to pairs or groups of three to four. Each pair or group is given a small pile of books focused on a sub-topic linked to your subject. These books can be pre-decided by yourself or your librarian. Working together, the students can jot down key details of their books on an accompanying worksheet (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-SR](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-SR)).

### Visit Authorfy!

You can also visit the

wonderful Authorfy website ([authorfy.com](http://authorfy.com)) to engage students in a range of activities set by authors. This way, students will be able to develop their own reading and writing skills using techniques suggested by an industry professional.

### Read & Share

At the start of your lessons, try reading short extracts from either a fiction or non-fiction book. Make it a rule within your practice that you'll read to your students out loud as much as possible to demonstrate good reading. Modelling reading with appropriate expression, intonation and flare will enable students to hear words they don't know being read out loud. If time allows, hold a brief discussion on what students have learned about:

- A key character or figure.
- The book's setting.
- One of the events described within the book.

This is a slow and steady strategy, but one that can deliver great wins in the end.

## Reading logs and diaries

It might seem like a strategy that's only viable in primary schools, but a good way of keeping students' reading momentum going through Y7 and Y8 can actually be for students to keep reading logs or diaries. Entries could be added at the back of their exercise books, or a separate mini exercise book or booklet. Encourage the students to read at home, so that they can respond in class to the following kinds of questions:



## BOOKS & BISCUITS

'Books and Biscuits' is an intervention programme designed for struggling readers that involves older students who find reading a pleasure. Students can attend a pre-school or break/lunchtime sessions where key texts are read to them by older students over a range of biscuits. A softer form of intervention, this approach can help to give your whole-school reading strategy a more inclusive, community-minded feel.

- What happened in the pages that you read today?
- What happened to the main character?
- What key ideas or information have you learnt?
- What questions do you now have about the story or the book you're reading?

This exercise can serve as a good homework task, but could also encourage students to read aloud to others (parents, siblings) at home.

### Further into non-fiction

Beyond subject-specific activities, non-fiction can sometimes be overlooked when recommending book to students that they might enjoy, based on their interests. Try creating a mini-survey for your students to complete, which could include questions such as:

- What are your favourite hobbies outside of school?
- What is your favourite topic to talk about with your friends?



- Who do you see as an inspirational person?

The information submitted can be anonymous, giving students the opportunity to express themselves freely. Once you have gathered their responses, search mainstream and independent news sites for interesting articles that will strengthen students' knowledge of key events and people around the world.

in roles that present opportunities to devise whole school reading strategies.

What follows are solutions and platforms that some schools are currently using to positively impact upon students' reading abilities. The assessment facilities these platforms provide can be used throughout the year to track reading progress across all year groups, and could be particularly helpful when preparing for the

## “Secondary teachers are increasingly encountering students unable to read subject-specific content”

You can also organise some quick reading games to test students' ability to distinguish real stories from fake ones. Examples of this might include:

- Having students read just the headline of a news story, and then write the story themselves, without any other information to go on. How does their invented story compare to the genuine original?
- Reading a profile or extract from a biography of a famous figure.
- Finding a social media post from a reputable individual that students must then interrogate.

What THREE questions about the post would students ask the individual if they could?

Activities like these will hopefully encourage students to become more critical readers of the text they read online.

### Tools for testing

The strategies detailed so far are just some of ways in which you can build in time for reading. Some TS readers may be

government's incoming Y8 reading assessment.

### Accelerated Reader

A reading assessment tool that's most effective when you're clear as to the suitable age ranges of the books held by your school library.

AR enables students to be quizzed on the books they've read and be tested on their reading skills.

The results from AR can then be used to identify what might be holding your struggling readers back, and ensure that the right students receive appropriate support.

### York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC)

YARC assesses students'

*fluency* in their reading.

It's a form of reading assessment best completed on a one-to-one basis, but it can require some degree of time investment.

If you've picked up on issues with students' reading fluency across a particular year group, YARC could provide you with a workable means of finding out why.

### Lexia

This literacy learning programme can be a good intervention for Y7 students

## WHAT ABOUT AUDIOBOOKS?

There are now plenty of ways in which students can hear literature – from short stories read aloud on YouTube, to Spotify subscriptions that enable access to a whole range of published audiobooks. Try listening to an audiobook together in the classroom, with or without the written text, and see how students feel and react to being read to. Your school could even invest in ePlatform (eplatform.co/gb) – a service that can grant students access to your school library services online, while also making a range of audiobooks available to them.

who might be struggling to sound out words and need support with phonics.

The Lexia programme is a wonderful option, but do consider how your primary feeders are teaching phonics, since this may provide you with a springboard for better supporting young readers who have phonic gaps.

Whichever strategies and literacy assessments you end up using, think about the data you want to gather on students' reading.

Carefully consider what you can do with this data, and how it could be used to improve students' levels of reading engagement.

When trying to 'fix' the reading deficit in a school, a multi-pronged approach is what you'll usually need when targeting struggling readers.



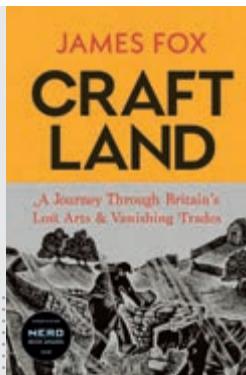
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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



# Off the Shelves

Brilliant titles for you and your students to explore

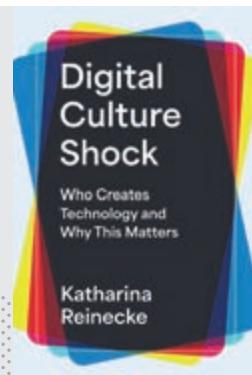


## Craftland: A Journey Through Britain's Lost Arts and Vanishing Trades

(James Fox, The Bodley Head, £25)

A book that offers a glimpse into the way traditional crafts were practised before the Industrial Revolution, in a manner rarely found in economic history books. Each chapter draws the reader in by focusing on the people still engaged in these trades today, and their often unassuming workplaces. In many cases it's a tiny group, or even just one person keeping the tradition alive. Why does this matter? Because these are stories of determination, resilience and of working with nature, rather than against it. Students searching for alternative career pathways instead of the traditional academic routes will surely find within these pages a fascinating and well-drawn explanation of a craft or tradition that will serve to inspire them.

**Reviewed by Terry Freedman**  
[bit.ly/Eclecticism](http://bit.ly/Eclecticism)



## Digital Culture Shock: Who Creates Technology and Why This Matters

(Katharina Reinecke, Princeton, £30)

There's been much discussion of the biases inherent to AI, facial recognition and other technologies, but as Reinecke explores in *Digital Culture Shock*, what's often lacking in such conversations is an appreciation of the challenges posed to modern technology by deeply entrenched cultural norms around the globe. In Rwanda, where internet connections are subject to frequent unplanned outages, people take the opportunity of the Wi-Fi going down to socialise with friends and neighbours. Or take driverless cars, and consider how helpless those vehicles trained on urban roads in the USA would be in Egypt, owing to the vastly different styles of driving. Then there's Naver - the most popular internet search engine in South Korea, which operates in a very different way to Google. Reinecke takes us on a tour of these and other knotty cultural quandaries we don't think about as often as we should, while proposing a few solutions along the way.

**Reviewed by Terry Freedman**



## The Penguin Book of Polish Short Stories

(Antonia Lloyd-Jones (ed), Penguin, £30)

The 39 stories in this collection span a hundred years, during which Polish society underwent seismic political change several times over. Rather than arrange the stories chronologically, Lloyd-Jones has instead opted to group them under a series of themes - 'Animals', 'Children', 'Couples', 'Men behaving badly', 'Women behaving badly', 'Misfits', 'Soldiers', 'Surrealists' and 'Survivors'. A few of the selections could certainly prove useful for history students, having been written by individuals who lived through WWII. For the most part, the stories are very readable and highly entertaining. Up until now, only nine of them had previously been available in English translation, making this volume a good introduction to the Polish literary tradition, and some imaginative approaches to writing and narrative that your English students might not have encountered before.

**Reviewed by Terry Freedman**

## ON THE RADAR

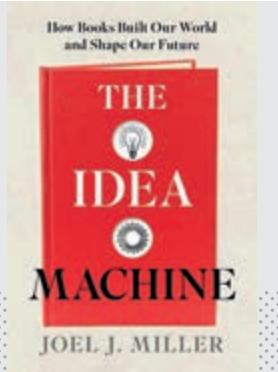
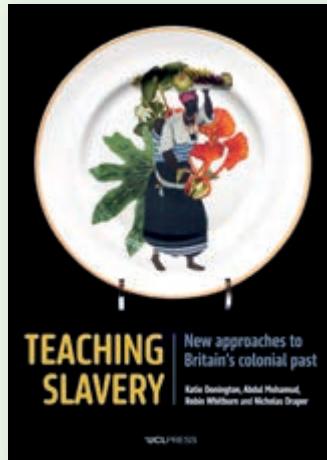
**Teaching Slavery: New Approaches to Britain's Colonial Past**

(Katie Donington, Abdul Mohamud, Robin Whitburn and Nicholas Draper, UCL Press, £37.69 paperback/free PDF via [tinyurl.com/ts151-B1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-B1))

The British Empire's involvement in the slave trade has come under increased scrutiny of late, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and protests that famously saw the forceful removal of statues honouring the likes of Bristolian merchant and slaver Edward Colston. It's a fascinating time to be a history teacher, but also a time in which broaching the topic of slavery in the classroom can be a fraught endeavour.

'Teaching Slavery...' opens with a helpful historical overview of how our collective understanding of the wider context for Britain's role in the slave trade has steadily evolved from a straightforwardly positive narrative hinging on the passing of the 1807 'Abolition of the Slave Trade Act' to one that's more nuanced and complex. The book's later chapters then zero in on the history of how the topic has been taught in schools, while offering up thoughtful insights into whose stories are getting told as a result, the difficulties of conveying the sheer scale of human suffering that occurred, and the pedagogical realities that history teachers must now grapple with, complete with useful case studies.

Despite being a scholarly work with a very specific readership in mind, it's elegantly written, gently persuasive in the points it put forward, and an easy book to recommend – even for non-history specialists, who might be keen to find out more about an important, yet contested chapter in our nation's account of itself.

**The Idea Machine: How Books Built Our World and Shape Our Future**

(Joel J. Miller, Globe Pequot, £30)

It's hard to imagine a time when books were once precious objects, and libraries an indicator of formidable power and influence; an era when just the very idea of a book – as opposed to a scroll – was considered remarkable. Miller traces the development of books right back to the origins of writing itself, and then onwards, through to the development of the world wide web and beyond, past AI. What emerges from Miller's telling is essentially a history of problems in search of solutions. How do we know what information is available? How do we find it quickly? How do we then use it? Underlying the book's insights is a simple, yet profound notion – that the act of writing something down enables others to respond to that information and think about it, hence the title. The written word has endured for millennia, and herein you'll discover why.

**Reviewed by Terry Freedman**

**Teens, Social Media and Image-Based Abuse**

(Jessica Ringrose & Kaitlyn Regehr, Palgrave Macmillan, £27.99 paperback/free PDF via [tinyurl.com/ts151-B2](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-B2))

One day, cultural historians will marvel at how adolescents were encouraged by multinational corporations to record themselves and others using compact computers, and share the resulting footage with digital audiences that could potentially number in the millions, all with minimal systemic oversight. For now, we have Ringrose and Regehr's account of their 2019 research project to examine young people's use of social media, which went on to inform the UK's Online Safety Act. The book breaks down in unflinching detail the observations of students at seven very different schools (ranging from a selective independent school to an inner city comprehensive), and is required reading for anyone wanting to unpack how cultures of online-driven misogyny, sexting and victim shaming came to take root in our schools over time. It's the story of how we got to where we are, the lessons of which we've only just started to properly absorb.

**Meet the authors**

**JESSICA RINGROSE & KAITLYN REGEHR**



Given the nature of the research you document in the book, were the schools you visited happy for students to engage with your questions?

**Jessica Ringrose:** It was more a case of us being unable to visit all the schools wanting to participate. This was in 2019, when schools were genuinely interested in hosting researchers, improving their sex education provision and digging into the issues surrounding their students' use of social media, which perhaps weren't as widely discussed as they are now. We certainly didn't encounter much critical pushback from teachers.

**Kaitlyn Regehr:** We were also operating against the backdrop of 'Everyone's Invited' – this online-driven awareness of sexual violence in schools that was emerging at the time. It's worth remembering that widespread public awareness of how technology, and social media in particular, can facilitate violence and harms is still relatively new. The *Anxious Generation* book [by Jonathan Haidt] that so many cite now only came out in 2024; Jessica's been doing this work since 2011. It was a different landscape – there was this hunger for information.

The book shows large gaps between students' awareness of online harms, and responses from officials that don't address the underlying issues. Are those gaps still there?

**JR:** One shocking finding in the book was that only 5% of young people would tell their parents about incidents, and 2% would talk to their school, pointing to a huge divide. A lot of work and awareness raising has happened since then, though – such as new RSE guidelines that cover digital harms, and the Curriculum and Assessment Review's calls for more teaching around digital literacy.

**KR:** One promising development in the US is the proposed Algorithmic Accountability Act, which, if it goes through, would essentially strip social media companies of section 230 protections. At present, they're recognised as housing content, but not being responsible for that content. Removing those protections would mean that they're culpable for harms taking place on their platforms. It's still early days, but the advocacy and lobbying behind those efforts is all down to research projects like this.

**Professor Jessica Ringrose is Professor of Sociology of Gender and Education at UCL Institute of Education; Dr Kaitlyn Regehr is an Associate Professor of Digital Humanities at UCL's Department of Information Studies**

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School improvement advice  
for headteachers and SLT

RISK ASSESSMENTS | AUDITS | HOME VISITS

## *The impossible EQUATION*

Hannah Carter examines what leaders' priorities should be when it comes to safeguarding – from health and safety in school, to visits home...

**A**fter 15 years in school leadership, there's one truth I can't escape. It sits with me, long after the building is empty and the emails have stopped for the day, and it's this – *schools are risk factories*.

From health and safety assessments inside school to the decisions made during home visits, school leaders are expected to manage an environment in which *nothing must go wrong*. Ever. Our professional duty, as set out in law and policy, demands no less than the absolute safety of every child.

So we build systems. We write policies. We complete risk assessments and promptly review them again. And even then, every single day, safeguarding remains not a matter of certainty, but probability.

To be clear, we're not 'eliminating risk'. What we're actually doing is managing the unmanageable, because risk isn't some fixed enemy we can defeat once and for all. 'Risk' is the endlessly shifting ground we stand upon, with leadership being a matter of deciding which risks must be addressed immediately, and which can be briefly tolerated while we decide how to act.

### 1. Static risks versus real risks

Leaders are trained in identifying hazards. Wet floors, fire exits, unlocked gates, faulty fencing – these are all familiar, plainly visible and reassuringly solvable hazards.

Health and safety assessments will often tend to focus heavily on static risks, yet the most serious safeguarding ones will rarely be contained neatly inside a form. The *real* danger lies in *dynamic risk* – those things that change hour by hour.

The pupil who appeared settled in Period 2, but is now sending out worrying messages by lunchtime. The parent who ends a phone call calmly and then waits outside in the car park. The staffing gap that coincides with a distressed child.

I remember arriving at work one Monday morning before 9am and finding three 'urgent issues' on my desk. One was a safeguarding concern that involved a child's unexplained bruising. The second was a report of total boiler failure (during winter). And then there was the governor demanding that I immediately return their call about the wearing of school uniforms.

Which was the biggest safeguarding risk? The bruising, obviously. *But* – if the school's heating did, in fact, suddenly switch off and then stay off, hundreds of pupils would need to be sent home, with their supervision shifting to



environments we know may be less safe than those in school.

This is the reality of leadership. Health and safety assessments capture hazards, but safeguarding requires leaders to constantly reassess risk in context. What matters most isn't whether you completed the form or not, but that you noticed *when the risk changed*.

### 2. Tick-box training and its limits

Safeguarding training rightly focuses on identification. Spot the signs. Record the concern. Report it. That all matters, but it's just the start. Identifying a concern is perhaps 10% of the challenge. The remaining 90% revolves around what happens next.

Do you contact social care immediately or speak to the parent first to gather more information – while knowing that simply by doing so, you risk alerting them? The police say they can't attend within the next two hours. The child is distressed. What's your risk tolerance during that window?

Training rarely prepares leaders directly for such moments. Instead, it provides attendees with flowcharts and templates. But these will usually be designed with orderly situations in mind

– not the ever-messy realities of human behaviour.

As a DSL, my main frustration was the false comfort provided by paperwork. We would spend hours assessing the risk of slips, or property getting lost on a routine trip, only for the real safeguarding issue to involve a sudden mental health crisis triggered by something entirely unpredictable.

Templates make us feel *compliant*; they don't make us safe.

Yes, health and safety assessments remain essential, but safeguarding is a mindset. Leaders need training that actually develops their judgement, rather than simply ensuring their compliance. Present people with potential scenarios where every option carries some level of risk and make them

explain their reasoning. *That* is how safeguarding confidence is built.

### 3. In-school priorities

So, what *should* leaders focus on first? I'd start with the '5-minute rule', which holds that when a pupil or colleague brings you a concern, stop and give them at least 5 minutes of your undivided attention.

That means no laptop, no surreptitious scanning of emails. Information is the most powerful safeguarding tool we have, but the moment someone feels dismissed, it disappears. I once brushed off a child's vague comment about '*A man with a funny hat*' near the fence. Days later,

that description matched someone police were searching for. I'd heard the words, but hadn't listened properly.

Next, there's the 'What if?' Audit, where you take your health and safety procedures and then stress-test them with your most practical colleagues by considering the following:

- What happens if the DSL and First Aider are both off-site?
- What should you do if the fire alarm sounds during a lockdown?
- How should you respond if a parent arrives at pick-up intoxicated?

Don't just write the answers down. Walk through them, practise them, because that's how risk assessments stop being

## JOINING THE DOTS

What could we gain by having schools work more closely with local health services? A recently published framework offers some intriguing proposals...

Now, more than ever, there are significant benefits to be had when schools partner with other organisations and agencies in their local area to improve outcomes for families.

An interesting demonstration of how this could work as a formal arrangement emerged in November 2025, with the publication of a national framework outlining how schools and NHS trusts can form new kinds of partnerships aimed at improving the health, wellbeing and life chances of children and young people in their local communities.

Co-developed by Windsor Academy Trust, nine NHS trusts, the Confederation of School Trusts, the NHS Confederation and NHS Employers, the end result is 'Co-Creating Healthy Futures: Schools and Health - A Framework' (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-SG1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-SG1)), intended as a practical and comprehensive guide to how education and health services can be more closely integrated and deliver better outcomes for all.

At the heart of the framework is the idea that schools and NHS organisations can be seen as 'anchor institutions' that share certain civic responsibilities, and could therefore identify opportunities for joint commissioning, shared governance and prevention strategies that address broader issues relating to health inequalities, preventative healthcare and local aspirations.



The framework sets out some suggested steps towards making this a reality, including:

- Introducing local gateways aimed at fostering closer collaboration between school trusts, integrated care boards and public health teams
- Using schools as neighbourhood hubs to co-locate services and improve access for families
- Drawing up joint workforce strategies to help develop the next generation of NHS professionals

It's hoped that the framework can serve as a guide for school/trust leaders, integrated care boards, public health teams and local government partners, and show how joint programmes could lead to improved attendance, attainment and wellbeing for schools, while also easing pressures on

overstretched NHS services via earlier interventions and more accessible local support.

According to Dawn Haywood, chief executive of Windsor Academy Trust, "The wellbeing and future success of children depend on a holistic approach that connects education and health, because where we see educational inequalities, we also see health inequalities: they coexist.

"Schools and health providers both serve as vital anchor institutions within their communities. When we work together across sectors and systems, our combined efforts become a powerful force for public good. This framework captures that spirit of collaboration, offering a shared roadmap for creating healthier, fairer and more hopeful futures for every child."



## “Templates make us feel compliant; they don’t make us safe”

theoretical and actually start becoming meaningful.

### 4. Safeguarding the adults

Student safeguarding can't be separated from staff safety. The risk to adults in school will often be underestimated, but it is real.

One such risk can be malicious allegations. A false accusation will still automatically trigger formal processes – and rightly so – But for the staff member involved, everything stops. And even when cleared, the impact can linger. Leaders must therefore provide clear policies, transparent processes and unwavering internal support where staff have acted appropriately.

Another risk faced by staff is that of violence. Trauma doesn't always present quietly – indeed, I've seen experienced, caring staff injured in a matter of seconds. Mitigation here will entail genuine de-escalation training, realistic staffing decisions and a culture in which taking a step back is seen as a mark of professionalism, not weakness. Protecting staff shouldn't be seen as separate from safeguarding students, but very much part of it.

### 5. Home visits

Home visits remain one of the most uncontrolled safeguarding risks that

leaders accept. The rules here should be non-negotiable:

- Go in pairs.
- Log where you are and when you expect to return.
- Agree on a clear exit code ahead of time that signals the need to leave immediately.

You can't control what happens inside a home, but you can control how you enter and how you leave. Courage isn't a safeguarding strategy.

### Holding the balance

The safeguarding office isn't an administrative space, but rather a risk management hub. Every decision made there will be a response to some threat, whether known or emerging.

We want certainty and we want guarantees, but safeguarding is about managing impossible trade-offs with imperfect information. If, at the end of the day, children and staff are safer than they were that morning, then the equation is holding. Forms don't keep people safe. People do.



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



### WHAT DOES THE DATA SAY?

Student behaviour is often cited as an ongoing – and depending on who you ask, worsening – challenge to safeguarding within schools, so just how bad is it? Well, we can get at least a broad sense of what the data currently tells us from the latest National Behaviour Survey for the 2024/25 academic year.

The first thing to note is that while 84% of parents expressed support for their school's rules on behaviour, just 18% of pupils in Y7 to Y13 believed that said rules were 'Applied fairly to all pupils all of the time'.

Despite this apparent perception issue among pupils, an encouraging 95% of teachers reported feeling confident in their ability to manage misbehaviour in their school (with 32% of that group feeling 'very confident'). That confidence may in part be down to behavioural support being more readily available than before, with 54% of teachers reporting that they've been able to access behaviour-related training and professional development opportunities – a marked increase from the 40% of teachers who were able to say the same in 2023.

What about the daily view from the ground? In May 2025, 88% of school leaders, 63% of teachers and 57% of Y7 to Y13s felt able to say that their school had been calm and orderly 'every day' or 'most days' for the past week. The proportion of Y7 to Y13s saying they felt safe at school 'every day' or 'most days' in the past week meanwhile stood at 80% – a welcome improvement over the 73% who expressed those same sentiments in May 2024. Less positive, however, was the 70% of this year's Y7 to Y13s who said they felt motivated to learn – down from 75% in April 2024.

**The full National Behaviour Survey for 2024/25 can be downloaded via [tinyurl.com/ts151-SG2](https://tinyurl.com/ts151-SG2)**

## TECH IN ACTION

ExamJam | Collins

# Introducing ExamJam

A new, AI-powered revision platform that utilises Collins trusted GCSE study notes and practice to deliver personalised revision support

## WHAT IS EXAMJAM?

Combining award-winning AI technology with Collins' trusted GCSE study notes and practice, ExamJam is the next generation revision platform for students. Designed to optimise students' individual learning with targeted GCSE revision plans, it covers all core subjects, offering an easy to navigate learning journey for every topic.

The platform's exam-style practice makes use of timed sessions, explanations and examiner-style feedback to help students improve their marks. Personalised support from a helpful on-screen tutor facilitates deeper understanding and progress over time, with teachers able to track learners' level of engagement, study sessions, rates of progress and level of challenge over time.

## HOW DOES EXAMJAM WORK?

As students are guided through their revision notes, practice and tests, AI processes will surface core concepts and activities at the optimum time to provide the most effective learning. The ExamJam tutor then suggests where students should focus their attention next, and will proceed to conduct progress checks and revisit those areas where more work may be needed.

## WHAT SETS EXAMJAM APART?

Students subscribing to ExamJam receive complete subject coverage for GCSE English, maths and science, with Collins' trusted study notes and practice serving as the foundation. The learning journey for each topic is optimised by AI, enabling the creation of a personalised GCSE revision plan for each individual user. All this is delivered within a safe and secure environment that features built-in guardrails to keep data protected, while preventing the generation of any harmful content.

## Did we mention?

Your students can access ExamJam free for up to two weeks – simply register your details at [examjam.com/gcse](https://examjam.com/gcse). Schools interested in trialling ExamJam for themselves should visit [collins.co.uk/examjam](https://collins.co.uk/examjam).

ExamJam will be on show at Bett UK 2026. Join Collins at the event's Tech in Action Theatre for the session, 'Revising Smarter with ExamJam: Personalised GCSE Prep Powered by AI' (Wednesday 21st January, 11am); visitors can also demo ExamJam at stand SN81.

**Contact:**  
[collins.co.uk/examjam](https://collins.co.uk/examjam)



## THE PLACE:

RGS Worcester was the first school in the UK to be awarded the AI Quality Mark Gold Award for its leadership in the responsible use of AI, and the first to trial ExamJam. The school has adopted a set of 'Golden Rules for Using AI Tools' and an Integrated AI Strategy across its curriculum.

The school's engagement with AI is a testament to their thought leadership, demonstrating a clear commitment to preparing students for the future workplace with safe, ethical and pedagogically sound AI solutions.



## THE CHALLENGE:

*"For us, this is a unique pedagogical opportunity. It's a valuable chance for our pupils to influence the design of a next-generation study tool, and to understand that their perspective is critical in building ethical, effective educational technology."*

**- Howard Smith, Head of Science, RGS Worcester**

## EVENT DETAILS

### What is Bett?

Bett is the largest edtech exhibition in the world, holding annual events in the UK, Brazil and Kuala Lumpur. Visitors to Bett can explore an extensive show floor populated by an array of exhibitors large and small – from tech giants responsible for the platforms and hardware you use daily, to startups demonstrating innovative ideas that could yet transform the classrooms of tomorrow.

### Where is Bett UK?

ExCeL London, Royal Victoria Dock

### When is Bett?

21st – 23rd January 2026

### How do I register?

Head to [uk.bettshow.com/visitor-registration](http://uk.bettshow.com/visitor-registration) – entry is free to those working for schools, universities, government agencies and charities.



# FRESH PERSPECTIVES, PRACTICAL TOOLS

If you're a British educator with any interest in the present and future of edtech, you'll want to be at ExCeL London in late January – here's why...

**A**fter a record-breaking 2025, with a 23% surge in educator attendance and the largest exhibitor showcase in our 40-year history, we're raising the bar once again.

Our most exciting programme yet is here, packed with trailblazing thinkers and innovators exploring one powerful theme – 'Learning Without Limits'. Featuring Hannah Fry, Amol Rajan, Vivienne Stern MBE, Ofsted and many more sector-leading voices, this year's lineup will spark bold conversations around AI, digital strategy, skills, careers, esports and everything else shaping the future of learning.

Across every corner of education, you'll discover fresh perspectives, practical tools and free CPD designed to transform your practice and inspire meaningful change across your institution. From big debates that challenge the status quo, to hands-on sessions offering actionable takeaways, Bett UK 2026 has been carefully curated to equip every visitor with the clarity, confidence and creativity needed for the future, including the following...

### Women in edtech

Bett is committed to elevating diverse voices, and our Women in Edtech initiative returns refreshed and expanded for 2026. This influential space celebrates the women shaping the future of edtech – from founders and innovators, to classroom leaders, researchers and policymakers.

The Women in Edtech Mentoring Circles return for 2026 after a hugely successful launch last year. Conceived as supportive and safe spaces for women across both education and tech, they bring peers together in order to share experiences, offer advice and build meaningful connections. Whether you're a woman in the sector or an ally championing female leadership, the Mentoring Circles provide an invaluable opportunity to learn, connect and grow.

### Community-led spaces

Education thrives on community. Bett UK 2026 will therefore be shining an even brighter spotlight on the peer-to-peer connections that make our sector special. Back by popular demand, the MSP Village and SEND Village return



for 2026. These vibrant, community-led spaces were created to bring peers together around shared challenges and real-world opportunities. Curated with the help of partners, educators and experts, these hubs offer networking, content, workshops and rich resources in an environment built on collaboration and shared purpose.

Whether you're exploring solutions to immediate challenges, scouting what's next in edtech or looking to sharpen your vision for long-term transformation, Bett UK 2026 is your chance to connect, learn and lead. Educators go free – so get your tickets now at [uk.bettshow.com/visitor-registration...](http://uk.bettshow.com/visitor-registration)

# “Learning without limits”

The theme for this year's event focuses on the sheer power of education in all areas of life  
– Bett's portfolio director, Duncan Verry, tells us what it means to the team...

Education is humanity's greatest promise and most urgent mission – to ensure that every learner, everywhere, has the chance to discover their brilliance, shape their future and make their mark on the world.

Each day, in classrooms, workshops, homes and communities across the world, educators are turning obstacles into opportunities, technology into tools and lessons into life-changing moments. They're showing how innovation isn't just found in the end results of novel code or new circuitry, but in the creativity, compassion and courage of young learners.

## Tear down those walls

‘Learning without limits’ is the overarching theme of the Bett 2026 programme, but it's also more than that. It's a movement determined to tear down those walls that inhibit effective learning – inequality, inaccessibility, outdated thinking.

It's about trying reach each and every learner, be they in a crowded city school, a rural village or a refugee camp. And it's about recognising the value of combining human connection with the cutting-edge tools of AI, extended reality and other technologies to help realise possibilities that are scarcely yet imagined, so that education doesn't



simply keep pace with the future, but shapes it too.

At Bett, we celebrate all those who make this real. The community-built learning centre on the edge of São Paulo, alive with music, science and hope. The rooftop school in Kuala Lumpur, where pupils harvest rainwater to cool a laboratory space, learning in the process that science can solve problems they're able to see from their own windows. The adult learning centre in East London, where parents can study for degrees alongside their children's homework hours.

## Ignite what's next

‘Learning without limits’ means no learner being left unseen, unheard or

underestimated. It means having the courage to combine teaching with the very latest technologies, and refusing to accept that where you're born determines how far you can go.

This January at Bett, we gather to not just showcase what's new, but to ignite what's *next*. We're here to inspire, challenge and commit to building a world in which learning truly knows no boundaries.

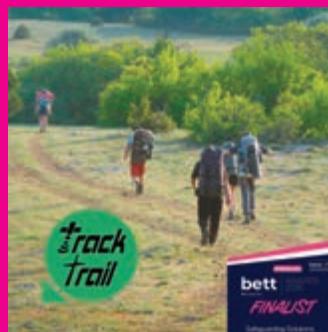
Whether you're exploring solutions to immediate challenges, or looking to sharpen your vision for long-term transformation, Bett UK 2026 is your chance to connect, learn and lead.

Duncan Verry is portfolio director, edtech at Bett

## teach SECONDARY RECOMMENDS

### GOLD STANDARD TRACKING

TrackTrail® is the UK's leading GPS tracking system for Duke of Edinburgh expeditions and outdoor education. Our trackers work in remote areas where mobile phones typically fail, enabling teachers to track students' locations in real time. Students navigate traditionally with a map and compass whilst teachers maintain oversight and the ability to respond to any emergencies with precise coordinates. Our web-based platform can track multiple groups simultaneously, requires no downloads and includes free support, with CE-certified devices available for hire from £15/weekend. We are an Ordnance Survey licensed partner; email [sales@tracktrail.co.uk](mailto:sales@tracktrail.co.uk) to find out how we can support your expeditions or visit **stand SP73**.



### REVISE SMARTER

At Bett 2026, discover ExamJam – the new GCSE revision tool grounded in Collins trusted, syllabus-specific content. Learn how its AI tutor, Milo, can move beyond passive quizzing to provide students with true personalised learning and proactive support mirroring that of a human tutor and examiner. By pairing instant, structured marking with adaptive study plans, the system can empower students to master content, improve exam technique and gain maximum marks, all with essential data protection and safety measures firmly in place. Catch our demonstration at the Tech in Action Theatre on Wednesday 21st January, commencing at 11am, or find us at **stand SN81**.

#### ExamJam | Collins

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## WHAT'S ON IN 2026?

This year's show is set to introduce some brand-new elements, while also bringing back some firm favourites. Use the guide below to start planning your route (and don't forget your comfy shoes)...

### Introducing Edtech 10

New this year will be the unveiling of the 'Edtech 10 List' – a celebration of 10 trailblazing females who are redefining the next era of education technology. This list goes beyond recognition; it's a platform for highlighting impactful work and notable success stories of women who have revolutionised the edtech landscape. Being part of this initiative means inspiring others and connecting with fellow innovators. Join us as we recognise their achievements live at Bett UK 2026.

### Tech User Labs

One of last year's standout programmes, Tech User Labs were oversubscribed by more than 400%. In 2026 we're making them bigger, better and more accessible by moving them onto the show floor.

These 45-minute, hands-on sessions will be your chance to experience real solutions in real time from the likes of Intel, Kahoot, Microsoft, ASUS and many more. Learn how to get more from your existing tools, test new products, troubleshoot pain points and build your institution's digital confidence. The slots for Tech User Labs fill up fast, so get your ticket and sign up now!

### The age of AI

Bett is one of the best places for exploring how technology

is transforming classrooms and empowering educators. The tech of the moment? AI, of course. Hear Challenge Innovate Grow founder and director, Dawn Taylor's insights on how the teacher's role is being redefined in the age of AI. The noted computer science education expert Mark Martin OBE (AKA @Urban\_Teacher) will meanwhile discuss how schools can take part in AI Awareness Day 2026 and boost their students' levels of digital literacy and creativity in the process.

Elsewhere, mathematician and author Hannah Fry will be in conversation with BBC broadcaster Amol Rajan onstage in The Arena, discussing the 'big picture' implications of AI technologies, and how they're likely to shape and transform wider society.

Find more agenda highlights at [uk.bettshow.com/agenda-highlights](http://uk.bettshow.com/agenda-highlights)



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## RECOMMENDS

### SAVE A LIFE

Now's the perfect time to start planning your Heart Month activities for February. Heart Month is a national moment aimed at driving awareness of heart and circulatory diseases through the teaching of CPR, fundraising and other activities.



British Heart Foundation's free digital tool, Classroom RevivR, makes it easy and fun for schools to teach CPR, helping students build the skills and confidence they'll need to help save a life. Be the reason your students know how to save a life by searching for 'Classroom RevivR' or scanning the QR code below – and visit us at Bett 2026 on stand SH82, where you can put your own chest compression skills to the test.



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Want to discover the right solutions for your learners in a fraction of the time? Using data and technology we make critical connections between education decision makers and solution providers, taking the 'work' out of networking.

## **bett** | Tech User Labs

• A Hyve Event

Our most popular programme, Tech User Labs, is back and taking to the show floor! With free sessions at Bett UK 2026, you'll learn how to get the most out of your current tech and explore emerging innovations within education - there's no CPD opportunity quite like it!



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## Q&amp;A

# Safeguard their independence

Richard Weremiuk, founder of TrackTrail®, shares how GPS tracking can enhance safety and wellbeing during Duke of Edinburgh expeditions...

## Why is safeguarding Duke of Edinburgh students so challenging?

Students face genuine risks on expeditions – getting lost in remote terrain, injuries far from help, severe weather in exposed areas – but traditional safeguarding responses compromise the independence that Duke of Edinburgh champions. Closer supervision reduces autonomy. Mobile phones often lack signal in expedition areas. Frequent check-ins interrupt the wilderness experience. When a group is late, teachers managing these risks don't know if groups are lost, injured or simply dawdling.

## How does TrackTrail® help when students get lost on expeditions?

TrackTrail® shows exact locations every few minutes, even where mobile phones typically fail. When groups go off-route, you know immediately. You can intercept them, or monitor as they self-correct, intervening only when necessary. There is no guesswork around deciding whether to deploy search parties. After the expedition, you can replay the breadcrumb trail during debriefs and show students precisely where their navigation went wrong, thus building skills for future expeditions.

## How does GPS tracking help with injury response?

In remote areas, finding injured students quickly is critical. Without tracking, you're reliant on the group's ability to describe their location. TrackTrail® provides the exact grid references that emergency services need, improving response times dramatically. Our devices include SOS buttons for alerting up to three nominated contacts. You can assess whether situations require an emergency response or can be managed internally, while simultaneously tracking other groups to ensure the incident doesn't cascade.

## Can't schools just use students' mobile phones for tracking?

Expedition areas often lack consistent mobile coverage where you need it most, and phone batteries drain quicker with GPS enabled. Phone access also undermines independence. Students may contact parents instead of problem-solving, or use mapping apps rather than learning navigation skills. TrackTrail® devices run for up to a week, work anywhere and remain invisible to the student experience. Students navigate using traditional skills whilst you maintain oversight remotely.

## 30 SECOND BRIEFING

TrackTrail® provides teachers with confidence and peace of mind during Duke of Edinburgh expeditions. The system's real-time GPS tracking reduces safeguarding risks in remote areas where mobile phones typically fail, enabling rapid emergency response whilst preserving the student independence that makes Duke of Edinburgh transformative.



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TrackTrail® provides GPS tracking for Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, off-site activities, and school trips.

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Richard Weremiuk is the founder of TrackTrail®

## What's the difference?

- + Real-time tracking provides teacher confidence and parental peace of mind during Duke of Edinburgh expeditions
- + Precise emergency coordinates and SOS alerts enable rapid response, reducing risk and improving student safety
- + Monitor student locations remotely and eliminate guesswork, whilst preserving the independence that Duke of Edinburgh tasks require

# Reasons to be CHEERFUL

**Kit Betts-Masters** considers the implications that AI may have for what we think of as 'digital literacy', and imagines what the best case scenario for an AI-driven classroom might look like...

**A** I is in everything now. It's helpful, but also fallible. Right now, it's in my PDF reading software and probably in yours too. If you're a Windows user, get used to seeing that Copilot button everywhere.

When the final report of the government's *Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR)* landed in my inbox, I asked an AI assistant to 'Show me all the references to artificial intelligence'. It duly produced a neat list of relevant quotations.

Acting on a hunch, I then performed a CTRL+F search of the document for myself. Up popped some further mentions that the assistant had apparently skipped – including a key line about '*The rise of artificial intelligence*' having the potential to reshape the way we work.

It was a small moment, but one that captured something important – that AI can be lazy, and essentially 'give up' when it thinks it's done enough to satisfy the user. It seems that our understanding of 'digital literacy' now has to include checking the machine, not just asking it clever questions.

**Your 'trusted sidekick'**  
Generative AI has moved from being a relative novelty, to being pitched as a trusted

sidekick in almost every digital task. Students will still need those traditional IT skills, however (if 'find in document' can be considered as such), and they'll need to develop an appreciation for AI's limitations, even if the systems they end up working with are more capable than the ones we use today.

Yes, changing the way we work can be daunting, but it can also be exciting. My position is that students and adults alike should see AI as a tool for *increasing quality*, rather than simply *saving time*. If an AI can differentiate a set of

'*Write this for me*', but '*Help me check this and make it better*'. The students in question will need to be equipped for a world of work in which they won't be writing 'one-size-fits-all' documents, but rather working *with* knowledge, within certain legal and procedural frameworks.

## Setting the tone

For many, a big part of AI's appeal is its promise to complete in minutes work that used to take hours. Having very quickly reached the point where AI can present us with useful

summaries tailored to different contexts, the challenge now is that of *managing truth*. We need to know what

the AI's database contains, and whether we can be confident that the outputs the AI gives us are accurate and useful, rather than what the machine supposes *sounds* right, or thinks we will want to hear.

In my writing, I use AI as a kind of 'critical friend'. I'll first produce an initial draft in my own words, then ask an AI model what I've missed, how the structure could be clearer and whether any parts are confusing. I'll ignore some of its suggestions, act on others and then rewrite portions of the draft to ensure it still sounds like me.

That's the habit I want my students to develop – not

**"Students and adults should see AI as a tool for increasing quality, rather than simply saving time"**

questions at an individual level, accurately gauge the knowledge and skills of each student and create individually-tailored lesson resources for them, why wouldn't we use that?

The aforementioned CAR highlights the widespread concern that young people aren't developing adequate skills in digital literacy, despite employers reporting a shortage of such skills. Recent advances in AI, notes the report, make it essential that students understand how AI works, are aware of its capabilities and limitations, and can learn how to use it without



**1+2=3**



becoming dependent upon it.

The DfE has also helped set the tone through its own guidance on use of AI in schools. The government message is that teachers can use AI to help with planning, resource creation, marking and admin, but that all professional judgements and responsibilities must sit firmly with the human adults in the room. In the DfE's view, teachers are 'irreplaceable', with the main aim for AI being to free up teachers' time for more face-to-face work with pupils.

Use of AI by students is treated more cautiously. Schools are reminded that many mainstream AI tools are for use by over-18s only, and that any pupil use of AI will require appropriate safeguards, filtering and supervision, alongside careful consideration of AI's implications for learning and homework.

## Showing your working

I'm proud of being a science teacher. We teach students to think. Science isn't really about electromagnetism, electrolysis or photosynthesis; it's about how we gather evidence and how we use it, and AI is an awesome tool for assisting with that.

The Review explicitly acknowledges this when it talks about 'media literacy', pointing out that subjects such as history and science already help young people to analyse claims, weigh up evidence and spot bias, and in the case of science, critically and empirically evaluate various scientific claims. All this matters much more in an age when realistic photos, videos and audio can be generated in seconds by anyone with a web browser.

Personally, I love using tech in my classroom. In the past, I'd record students' results during an experiment and quickly use Excel to plot a graph, which we'd then

analyse together on the board. This form of rapid analysis was something I wanted them to be able to do over the next few lessons. Now, I simply snap a photo of the students' results, and AI makes a graph showing us the relationship in what they're doing within just a few seconds!

But, you may ask, what's so aspirational about that? *Lots*, I would argue, in that it allows us to do more, better, in less time. Analysing the steps taken by an AI to reach an answer is just as useful as peer marking, or using a model example of what a good answer looks like. And if it produces an error, re-prompting the AI to correct its working is precisely what skilled users of AI are already doing to create output of hitherto unimaginable quality.

## Conversation and experience

Where I see AI mostly improving education is in giving us a chance to put human conversation and practical experience back at the very centre of what we do. In a good science lesson, the most important moments will often be those when you're stood at the board, arguing with the class about what a graph really shows, or walking around the room as they wrestle with a tricky practical and gradually find their way through it.

If an AI system can quietly generate differentiated questions, draft model answers or provide individual support when students are stuck, that leaves me free to spend more of my time in *those* moments. The technology becomes a background tool that helps us think together; not a replacement for that thinking.

When I imagine the classroom 10 years from now, I don't see myself walking in and opening a PowerPoint file. I imagine

systems that already know what my department has planned for the term, which have analysed prior assessments, and can suggest starter questions matched to where each student actually is that point in time.

As the pupils file in, AI might help me choose a calming image to display on a Friday afternoon, or a striking graph for a Tuesday morning, since the system will have learned what helps the students to settle and readily engage.

While they work, AI tools could be proposing individual tasks, drafting plenaries and setting tailored homework that's sent direct to their devices, while I move around the room watching, listening and guiding the thinking.

If we get this right, the next version of our curriculum won't ask pupils to pretend AI doesn't exist.

It will assume that they'll be maturing in a world where models can scan, summarise and simulate at speed, and focus instead on helping them ask better questions, understand data and evidence, and know when not to trust the first answer on a screen. Our job will be to make sure that the generation inheriting these tools can still notice what's missing, hit CTRL+F and insist on seeing the whole picture.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kit Betts-Masters is a lead practitioner for science and produces physics, education and technology videos for YouTube under the username @KitBetts-Masters; for more information, visit evaluateeverything.co.uk





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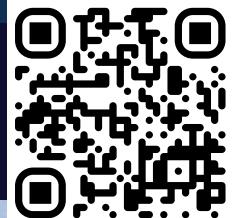
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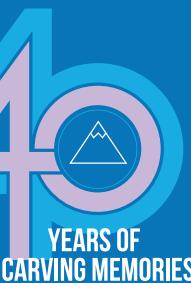


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# FOCUS ON: THE ARTS

Why arts education may be on the upswing; the theoretical and practical lessons students can learn from studying film; and why genuine creativity sometimes requires us to get a little weird...

**How can we ensure that all students get the chance to actively participate in the creative processes involved in learning about the arts?**

## THE AGENDA:

### 58 UNIVERSAL HARMONY

Matthew Rudd welcomes what appears to be an increased emphasis on arts education in the wake of the government's curriculum and assessment review

### 60 "LET THEM REPRESENT THEMSELVES"

Jose Sala Diaz celebrates the transformative power of film and media studies

### 62 CREATIVE BURST

Encourage your art students to venture beyond the conventional and embrace the strange with some creative thinking activities, suggests Alice Guile



# Universal HARMONY

**Matthew Rudd** welcomes what appears to be an increased emphasis on arts education in the wake of the government's curriculum and assessment review...

**S**inging along to the radio in your car. Dancing at a wedding. Taking in a live concert. All commonplace experiences that underscore the fundamental role that music and the arts play in our society.

Luciano Pavarotti once said that "*A life spent in music, is a life well spent*". By contrast, it's been disappointing to observe the accusations from some quarters that restoring the arts as an educational priority amounts to a 'dumbing down' of the academic curriculum.

## Gradual decline

That couldn't be further from the truth. As any teacher of the arts knows, far from 'dumbing down' what students learn, arts subjects in fact develop and hone a range of skills that include critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and collaboration – all of which are more vital than ever in our technology-driven world, even as some students struggle to perceive the value of non-STEM subjects, such as music.

If it's true that 'Education is what survives when learning has been forgotten', don't schools have a responsibility to focus on what the arts can do for students, rather than treating them as a bolt-on to support wider learning?

My own subject, music, is intrinsically valuable because of its role in young people's personal development.

England has one of the most extraordinary amateur music scenes in the world, which one could surely argue is evidence of its enduring importance beyond the classroom.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that we've seen a gradual decline in entries for GCSE music that amounts to a 19% reduction over the last ten years. Faced with those kinds of numbers, how can we, as music teachers, hope to reverse what would appear to be increasingly negative perceptions of music as a subject, and instead encourage more young people to study it at GCSE and beyond?

## Improving accessibility

It's been well documented that uptake of GCSE music is significantly lower among disadvantaged students, compared to their more affluent peers. Finding ways

activity for themselves, and then build upon their skills by acquiring further practical experience. We've found that choir, in particular, is a valuable way of ensuring that all students can access music, regardless of their own circumstances or skills.

Making it so that all students can enjoy the rich rewards of live performance is similarly important. Our lunchtime concerts therefore help to create accessible, low-pressure performance environments in which students are able to grow in both ability and confidence.

## Engaging with your local community

You can extend your school's music programme beyond the hall by establishing useful partnerships with local venues. In Cambridge, for example, we've been lucky to partner with not just local

churches, but also with the University of Cambridge and its college chapels.

Performing in off-site venues will inspire those students taking part, while also helping to raise aspirations for those who might not be used to attending live performances in such places. Other venues in the city – such as The Portland Arms, a much-loved pub and live music venue – help by hosting our Rock School performances, which provide our students with experience of giving authentic performances in real-world settings.

I would also encourage teachers in state schools to explore any opportunities for potential partnerships with their nearest independent schools. After we received the generous gift of a Bechstein piano from one of our student's parents, we were able to donate the good

## "Music is intrinsically valuable because of its role in young people's personal development"

to ensure that music can remain open and accessible to all, regardless of individuals' personal circumstances, is therefore crucial. At Stephen Perse Cambridge, we don't require our students to audition before joining one of our musical clubs or societies, specifically so that as many young people as possible can participate.

From choir, to orchestra, to rock school, students are able to choose their preferred



quality grand piano we'd previously used to a local state-maintained secondary school to help enhance their music provision and expand the resources available to their students.

If you haven't already, I'd also recommend looking into piano donation programmes such as Piano Equals (see [tinyurl.com/t151-M1](http://tinyurl.com/t151-M1)), which donates recycled and repaired pianos to schools across the UK to help address music departments' lack of access to musical instruments.

### A wide range of options

In my experience, the piano remains a consistently popular choice of instrument with students. Drums and guitar have steadily increased in popularity over the past 20 years, whilst wind instruments like the flute and clarinet have gradually declined. Within

our schools, we've seen other instruments, such as the trombone, fluctuate in demand, but it remains hugely important for music departments to do what they can to accommodate a wide range of interests.

Of course, given the rapid advances we've seen in music technology, we're no longer restricted to offering our students the option of studying only voice or real-world instruments in music lessons. They can now pursue interests in digital composition through access to Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) such as GarageBand, and notation software such as Sibelius.

Technology can now be used to enhance music provision across all schools, and provide new modern pathways for students to engage with music as

either a subject or an extracurricular activity.

### Focusing on more than music

As well as using technology to appeal to a broader student audience, schools can enrich their curriculum by embedding international awareness and multicultural exploration into their music provision. Every school's demographics will be different, but if yours has a multicultural student population, music can provide great opportunities for leaning into that.

Offering a diverse cultural repertoire will appeal to more students and open up a wider variety of avenues for creative expression. At one of

our recent performances, for example, several of our Taiwanese students showcased a song from their home country, building cultural bridges with their audience through a shared love of music.

Collaborative music-making and performances are when things can get interesting. You can motivate and engage nearly all students by prioritising group rehearsals and performances as early as possible. As educators, we understand the importance and impact of inclusion – and whilst every young person will want to progress at their own pace, being intentional about the different parts of a performance provides opportunities for *everyone* to participate in some way. That applies whether they've accumulated 10 months of experience as a singer or musician, or several years.

Ultimately, the extent of a school's music provision shouldn't be justified on the basis of the subject's external benefits (clear though those are). As a subject and co-curricular activity, it has *intrinsic* value in that it forms part of the human experience. By emphasising accessibility and diversity within our music lessons, we can make sure that we equip students with a lifelong love of music, and all the confidence, joy and skills that come with that.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Rudd is director of music at Stephen Perse Cambridge – a family of independent schools across Cambridge, Madingley and Saffron Walden – serving as musical director at Ely Consort since 2002, while also overseeing the music department at Stephen Perse Cambridge. During his career, he has delivered training courses to music teachers in Singapore, Malaysia, Botswana and even Mongolia. For more information, visit [stephenperse.com](http://stephenperse.com)

# “Let them represent themselves”

**Jose Sala Diaz** celebrates the transformative power of film and media studies

In an era when every interaction and hobby feels like it's been distilled into 'content' – i.e. a media substance that can be controlled and monetised – film studies and media studies at GCSE stand tall as subjects capable of leading a paradigm shift.

That's because they not only teach students how to really *see* what they see around them, but also how to shape their own representations, and harness their creative skills in the service of imagining better, more optimistic futures.

## Learning how to see

In media and film, we teach that no image comes from nowhere. Students learn how to analyse audiovisual texts from a critical and aesthetic viewpoint based on five main areas – *microelements, representation, audience, industry and contexts*.

The popular Netflix series *Stranger Things*, to flag up a topical example, relies heavily on fabricated nostalgia for the 1980s – something that Warner Bros has also attempted to do, albeit in different ways, with the *Harry Potter* series. Disney has gone down a similar route with its live action remakes.

*The Lost Boys*, on the other hand, released in 1987, did more to channel the cultural concerns of its time, including the fear of crime, rising divorce rates and perceived decline of the traditional family unit that characterised the Reagan era, while at the same time demonstrating a great understanding of horror conventions.



## “To study media and film is to study how fiction reflects reality”

See also 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause*, which echoed the then popular perception of teenage subcultures as groups of criminals without a future, while simultaneously contrasting the nihilism of its imagery with its beautiful rendering in Technicolor.

Back here in the 21st century, *Whiplash* is an excellent film to show students when discussing toxic masculinity, culminating as it does in an ending built around our audience perceptions of individualism and success.

Then there's *Skyfall* (2012), the 23rd entry in the long-running *James Bond* franchise, which deals with a generational clash between old and new, while pointedly commenting on our modern-day attitudes to digital technology and the British Empire.

## Finding connections

The films cited above have all been discussed in our school's classes, if not explicitly included in the GCSE and A-Level Film specifications. It's been said that whoever controls the media controls the culture. To study media and film is to study how fiction reflects reality, usually following a series of very specific choices.

The study of media and film helps students explore precisely how and why those choices are made. It can show them how the practice of video editing – a foundational media and film element – can suddenly become hugely important in the context of a Donald Trump speech broadcast by the BBC, to such an extent that the BBC's director general feels compelled to resign his position.

Blair Waldorf, the young

New York socialite portrayed in the *Gossip Girl* novels and subsequent TV adaptation, once remarked that 'Fashion is the most powerful artform' because it 'combines movement, design, and architecture'.

I would in turn suggest that media products are a form of art, since they can be both medium and form in a given context.

Media and film students are taught how to find and trace connections, accidental or otherwise. We explain how Dua Lipa, in her song 'Illusion' and its accompanying video, is engaged in a conscious dialogue with both a prior Kylie Minogue music video and a 1992 *Time* magazine cover celebrating that year's Olympic Games – an exercise in intertextuality which proves that nothing is born from a void (regardless of what those feverishly discussing the latest trending topic might try to tell you). The more that media students get to explore, the more references

they'll be able to spot and distinguish in the products they consume today.

### “But I just watch videos on my phone!”

At one time, many assumed that the rapidly expanding availability and bandwidth of the internet would enable near instant access to virtually every film ever made, and encourage students to expand their cultural horizons – but that's not quite what's happened.

While it is indeed technically possible for students to locate virtually every film or series ever made somewhere online, teachers have found themselves needing to fight back against a strain of audiovisual homogenisation.

Everything often looks the same, and everyone seems to be consuming much the same things (those ‘things’ often being daily viral videos on TikTok). Students *see* worse than ever, but by that I don't mean the overlit shots of so many modern movie productions, or those CGI effects that rely so heavily on post-production processes. I mean the *lack of internalised references* that's preventing this generation from

consuming audiovisual texts falling outside of what social media algorithms serve up for them.

That's why it's more important than ever that we educate students on how to watch (and, indeed, how *not* to). Attention is the currency of our times, so it's up to teachers to recommend, introduce and open up paths of discovery that lead to different creatives and their unique perspectives.

The number of students unfamiliar with the likes of Sofia Coppola, Michel Gondry or Guillermo del Toro and their work is huge, despite those creators generally being considered to not be *that* obscure.

It's been a pleasure seeing how well the students respond to these three directors' very different directorial styles.

I believe that despite all the endless scrolling on their phones, our students are still able to recognise talent, personality and beauty when they see it, and that it makes sense to have them analyse what makes certain works appealing. Now especially, would it not make sense to challenge students to become critical thinkers?



### The practical element

Finally, it's worth highlighting that 30% of film and media grades are based on coursework.

In film, students have to create an introductory sequence to a suggested longer work. In media, they're tasked with producing a short music video, a magazine or the opening part of a TV series, thus demonstrating their understanding what makes each medium unique, and how codes and conventions can be challenged.

This practical element teaches students that everything they consume on their phone screens involves an immense amount of invisible yet highly creative work behind the scenes, courtesy of a large creative industry that's powered by thousands of people.

The students' practical work is also essential because the art of storytelling sparks cognitive development. A key issue for this current cohort is their tendency towards self-isolation and lack of empathy when compared to their generational predecessors. Putting your phone down for two hours and placing yourself in someone else's shoes requires effort; it demands that students recalibrate their ability to focus, and reorient how they see and think.

The challenges involved in representing an idea, person

or theme, and in understanding the ‘other’ are rewarded during this coursework process. It requires them to build *their own* representations and to develop *their own* voices. From initial storyboard drawings, through location photography, shot composition, set design and visual effects work, these students get to choose how they want to be seen, and have the chance to become creators themselves.

At a time of great uncertainty regarding authorship and the algorithmic forces that distribute the content we consume, the fact that we can teach students such abilities shouldn't be treated lightly. Just as we should resist the notion of ‘cinema’ being reduced down to ‘content’, we should ensure that students can't be reduced to mere nodes picked up by algorithms. Because if our students don't choose how they want to be represented, someone else will do it for them.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jose Sala Diaz is head of media at The Priory School, Hitchin; the photos used to illustrate this article were all made by media and film students at the school

# CREATIVE BURST

Encourage your art students to venture beyond the conventional and embrace the strange with some creative thinking activities, suggests **Alice Guile**

**M**any art and design departments will run GCSE 'taster sessions' for their KS3 students ahead of them choosing their options, but it's possible to take this in a more interesting direction. Why not offer an exciting and engaging workshop that explores the psychology behind creativity?

Creativity – the ability to create novel ideas and come up with unusual solutions to problems – can be influenced by qualities such as openness and persistence. Rather than coming from a specific area of the brain, it's thought that creativity instead emerges from multiple neural networks all collaborating with each other and the executive control centre that turns thoughts into actions.

Providing students with opportunities to let their minds simply wander is therefore very important; the act of making connections between previously unrelated objects or topics is a key component of creativity.

## Divergent thinking

When teachers facilitate creative thinking

opportunities, it strengthens the brain's ability to get those different areas working at once – what's described as divergent thinking.

Divergent thinking is almost diametrically opposed to much of the learning that's done in school, which typically involves learning the correct answers to specific questions. This internalising of facts for the purpose of responding with right answers is convergent, or linear thinking.

## "Creativity utilises multiple areas of the brain at once"

Students who happen to be neurodivergent may be especially adept at divergent thinking tasks. This could present opportunities to discuss with pupils how people who live with autism, dyslexia and ADHD have brains that work differently, and that scientific research has shown how they may be at an advantage when tackling tasks that require divergent thinking.

## Where art meets psychology

The Surrealists – of whom the most famous is, of course, Salvador Dali –

would deliberately employ creative thinking exercises to boost their creativity, and you can do the same thing with your students.

The Surrealists were particularly interested in the work of Sigmund Freud and his investigations of the subconscious. They saw the subconscious mind as a huge realm of unexplored creativity, and crafted exercises in an effort to access and further develop this part of their psyche.

I've previously used similar exercises in lessons as part of a Surrealist scheme of work, while also introducing students to Sigmund Freud and his 'iceberg theory' of the id, ego and superego. Afterwards, they told me that they'd found exploring these links between art and psychology made it much easier for them to understand and engage with the work of the Surrealists.

As a first step, you could use a PowerPoint presentation to familiarise students with the psychology of creativity, and how this helped the Surrealists to

develop highly imaginative work. You could then try to run some of the creative thinking activities detailed in the 'Try it yourself' panel.

## What about other subjects?

Some creative thinking activities can be potentially adapted and used in the context of other subjects. '30 Circles', for example, may work as a good introduction to a creative writing assignment in English, or the devising of an original scene in drama.

If running a general creative thinking workshop, we could also take inspiration from Edward de Bono's thinking exercises. Edward de Bono was a doctor and creative thinking expert who wrote numerous books, and originally coined the term 'lateral thinking'. One of his ideas was the 'Six thinking hats' model:

- **White Hat:** Presents objective facts and data
- **Red Hat:** Provides emotional responses, feelings and intuition without judgment
- **Black Hat:** Critically evaluates risks, points out problems and explains why an idea might not work

- **Yellow Hat:** Expresses the positive aspects and opportunities of an idea
- **Green Hat:** Generates creative and unconventional ideas and solutions
- **Blue Hat:** The chairperson – sets the agenda, resolves disputes and ensures the discussion stays on track

To illustrate what this method looks like, let's use the example of a geography teacher. This teacher has set their students the task of coming up with presentations about the planning of a new housing development. Having formed groups of six, the students might come up with a basic plan and then be asked to each 'wear' a different hat.

The white hats might focus on the facts regarding what a good housing development should contain, in a fairly utilitarian way. The red hats might consider how people would feel living there and how the development could be made to look beautiful. The black hats would look for flaws in the basic plan. The yellow hats would focus on the benefits of the plan. The green hats would look to improve the plan using unconventional and creative ideas. The blue hats would meanwhile manage the project, and make sure everyone was contributing.

This approach could similarly work when set the task of designing an event or restaurant in food technology, product

development in D&T, or when launching a new startup in business studies. In history, you could ask pupils to apply this method when evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the treaty of Versailles – how it made the German people feel, and how it could have been done better.

### How do pupils benefit?

Encouraging students to think more creatively (or critically, in the case of the 'Thinking Hats' exercise) has huge benefits. As previously discussed, creativity utilises multiple areas of the brain at once; pupils practising these methods are therefore likely to improve their ability to generate novel ideas over time.

Moreover, we're currently preparing our young people for a volatile and rapidly changing world – one in which flexible thinking and the ability to solve problems are set to become ever more vital life skills.

By teaching students thinking skills now, we'll be setting them up to become adaptable and creative adults who are able to take on big challenges and thrive.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Guile is a secondary school art teacher

## TRY IT YOURSELF

### EXQUISITE CORPSE

Perhaps the most well-known Surrealist exercise, this involves giving several participants a single sheet of paper. Each participant then draws a head on their sheet, before folding the paper over and passing it to the next person, repeating the process until a full figure is drawn on every sheet.

### 30 CIRCLES

Give each student a sheet on which are displayed 30 circles. In each one they should write the name of any random item that comes into their head. This activity is inspired by the surrealists' use of automatic writing – writing without thinking – which they believed helped them to access the subconscious.

Having written their items, the students close their eyes and randomly point to a circle without looking. They then do this twice more, and proceed to draw a surreal image that combines all three of the words. If done as part of a surrealist GCSE art topic (as opposed to a one-off workshop), students could complete the activity multiple times to create a double page spread containing several distinct surreal images created in different media.

### CUBOMANIA

Pupils cut a photo up into small squares and rectangles then reconstruct the pieces

in a completely novel and unexpected way.

### PHOTOMONTAGE

Pupils cut out a variety of visually recognisable images and passages of text from different magazines and newspapers, and proceed to re-assemble their cut-out visual elements in new and surprising combinations.

### FROTTAGE

A technique developed by Surrealist artist Max Ernst, this involves putting paper over textured surfaces and rubbing pencils, wax crayons or charcoal over them. He would use the random patterns this created to form unique images.

### DREAMSCAPES

Pupils use their dreams – or someone else's, if they can't remember their own – as direct visual inspiration for the creation of a Salvador Dalí-style dreamscape.

### DECALCOMANIA

This describes the process of applying various materials to freshly painted surfaces while they're still wet, and removing them to create unique patterns that can inspire unusual drawings. I've done this myself using watercolours and cling film. You can twist the film and even add salt, which will absorb the surrounding watercolour residue and produce some particularly unusual textures.



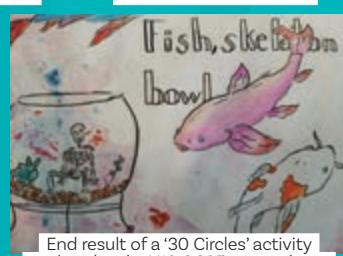
Example of a 'Surrealist Dreamscape' piece by a Y10 student



Completed 'Exquisite Corpse' exercise from a Y9 class



Several 'Cubomania' pieces produced by a Y10 GCSE photography class



End result of a '30 Circles' activity undertaken by Y10 GCSE art students

# What 'homework' REALLY MEANS NOW

We can't put the AI genie back in the bottle, so it's time to redefine what homework is, and what it's for, suggests **Anthony David**

**I**s sometimes think back to the days when 'plagiarism' meant copying a paragraph from Wikipedia and hoping nobody would notice. It feels almost quaint now.

With the AI genie now truly out of the bottle, the ground has shifted under our feet. We've spent years building clear expectations around academic honesty, original thinking and the value of struggle. Then along comes a tool which, in seconds, can produce an essay, translate a passage, condense a chapter or write a convincing reflection. It's all become too easy.

In this brave new world, the obvious question to ask is *'Has homework had its day?'* If students can hand in polished, fluent and technically correct work without actually needing to engage with the learning process, then what's purpose of setting such tasks in the first place? If the work can be done *for* them, rather than *by* them, where does that leave us?

It's tempting to see the landscape currently before us as a kind of lawless wild west – but I don't think it is. If anything, the past two years have forced us to rethink what really matters when it comes to homework, and pushed many of us to design tasks that can reveal true understanding in a much more reliable way.

## The limits of AI

A key misconception around AI is that it 'replaces

thinking'. It doesn't. It imitates, it predicts, it assembles, but it doesn't know the child, the lesson or the nuances behind how a student reached an idea. Sure, it can write a competent paragraph as part of a GCSE poetry comparison – but it can't recreate the conversation that took place in your classroom that morning, or pass comment on a misunderstanding you deliberately unpicked with the class.

And this is where I think the narrative around AI and

## Practical approaches that work

There are, however, some strategies that teachers have been trying with surprising success – including the following...

### 1. Anchor homework to the classroom, not the internet

When a task requires students to reference your explanation, your model or their own notes, AI tools will immediately become less helpful to them. A prompt such as *'Using the method we practised in period four, solve these three equations and explain which step you found*

- *'What mistake did you spot yourself making and how did you fix it?'*

AI could generate a set of answers, but students will typically reveal their understanding (or lack of it) through the personal details they include.

### 3. Ask for evidence of thinking

We've reintroduced rough workings, annotated pages, mind-maps and voice notes into certain subjects. Asking a student to submit three photographs of their process, or a 30-second audio reflection alongside their work, gives you something that AI can't easily fake.

This is especially effective in subjects like English, science, DT and maths.

### 4. Set choice-based tasks

AI can often struggle with tasks that involve expressing personal preferences, reasoning or lived experience. A history task that asks students to *'Choose the argument you think is strongest and justify it'* shifts the focus away from producing a 'perfect' paragraph to revealing the student's own thinking.

### 5. Actually USE AI (as a tool for learning, and not learning avoidance)

Students will often turn to AI because they feel stuck, overwhelmed or worried about getting tasks wrong. If we normalise AI as a thinking partner – as something that can

## "Are we assessing the product, or the learning that led to the product?"

plagiarism must shift to. If a homework task can be completed convincingly by an AI tool, without the student truly understanding the content, then the issue isn't the child's dishonesty – *it's that the task is no longer fit for purpose*. That's not a criticism of teachers; more a recognition that the world has changed faster than school systems usually do.

At the heart of the matter is this quandary: are we assessing the product, or the learning that led to the product? When AI is used as a shortcut, what's lost is the *process*. Our challenge therefore becomes one of designing tasks where the process remains visible at all times.

*hardest and why*' will produce work that reflects a student's actual thinking. AI can certainly try to invent an explanation, but what it can't do is replicate a moment from your lesson.

### 2. Set 'micro-reflections' rather than lengthy essays

Instead of tasking students with producing polished extended pieces of writing, ask for short, structured responses that demonstrate how they have processed the material. For example:

- *'What was the most surprising thing you learnt today, and why?'*
- *'Rewrite today's key idea in your own words and give one example that wasn't in the textbook'*

summarise passages, generate examples or explain concepts more simply – then we take away the secrecy.

In our schools, we explicitly teach students how to use AI ethically for specific tasks. These approved uses include checking for understanding; to improve revision efficiency; to generate practice questions; and potentially rephrase something they didn't grasp in class.

The rule we teach is simple. AI may *support* your learning, but it cannot *stand in for* your learning.

### What about detection?

Teachers often ask whether AI-detection tools are the answer. I take a cautious view. Detection will improve, but it will never be perfect, and the risk of generating false positives is too high to rely solely on automated judgements.

Instead, I approach detection tools as a prompt. If they flag something, that's a sign to talk to the student, not a cue to jump to conclusions. The more important point to bear in mind is that if we can design homework that makes students' learning visible, detection tools become far less necessary.

Our students' voices, the misconceptions they have and the specific steps they've taken can become part of the work itself. For me, the real opportunity in the AI era is to shift our existing culture around academic honesty. Rather than framing plagiarism as a punishable offence, we can instead position AI misuse as a misunderstanding of what homework is for.

### Unexpected benefits

When students see homework as an extension of learning, rather than as a performance, they're far more likely to use AI constructively. The conversation can start to look like this: *'I can see you used AI to write this paragraph. Tell me what you understood and what you didn't.'* That doesn't close doors; it opens them.

Our overall aim here shouldn't be to catch students out, but to help them grow into the kind of thinkers who don't see the need to take such shortcuts.

AI has given us some unexpected benefits too. It's forced us to strengthen the link between instruction and assessment. It's encouraged more extensive use of formative feedback, a greater emphasis on

low-stakes practice and increased transparency around how learning develops. It's pushed teachers to focus more on knowledge retrieval, application, misconceptions and reasoning – the very things that matter most in long-term retention.

Perhaps most importantly of all, it's invited us to talk openly with students about the nature of *thinking*. About all the messy parts, such as not hiding the draft stages and what it means to learn deeply, rather than perfectly.

### Homework is evolving

The age of AI hasn't killed homework. It's made us more precise, thoughtful and realistic about what we're actually trying to see when we set tasks.

AI isn't going away. Our task now should therefore be to build an ecosystem in which students learn to use AI responsibly, and teachers feel confident designing meaningful assignments. This way, academic honesty can become part of how we help children grow, rather than just something we need to constantly police.

Homework still matters, but its purpose has changed. It's no longer about producing the neatest essay, but about showing the *journey of learning* – which is something no AI can convincingly fake. In many ways, all that's really happened is that we've evolved into the next stage after Wikipedia-grabbing. We pivoted then, and in all likelihood, we'll pivot again.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony David is an executive headteacher working across Central and North London, and author of the book *AI with Education - How to Amplify, not Substitute, Learning* (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-AI1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-AI1))

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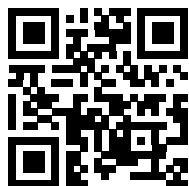
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# WHY I LOVE...

## ABOUT US:

Kate Hall is director of education at Hales Valley Trust in Dudley, West Midlands, which consists of seven primary schools, ranging from one to three-form entry, including nursery provision.



## TALKING ABOUT:

IRIS CONNECT'S COACHING, COLLABORATION AND REFLECTION TOOLS



### “How long have you been using it?”

We've been working with IRIS Connect for nearly 10 years. It was first introduced at one of our three-form entry schools, and since 2022 has been embedded in our school improvement strategy across the trust. It's now used consistently in all seven of our schools to support teacher development and quality assurance, directly underpinning the priorities of our Trust Education Excellence Strategy.

### “Why are you such a fan?”

I value IRIS Connect because it provides staff with a supportive, non-threatening way to improve their practice. This reflects the Education Excellence Strategy's commitment to building a culture of professional growth, where staff feel safe to reflect, take risks and refine their practice. The impact of this is improved teaching quality, which directly enhances the life chances of the children in our care.

### “What have you achieved with it?”

At school level, IRIS Connect has helped establish a consistent language around effective teaching that's aligned with our strategy. It's enabled focused CPD that's tailored to individual and team needs, while also improving the quality and frequency of developmental conversations. Teachers are more engaged in reflective practice, and feel a greater sense of ownership over their professional growth - an essential

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component of the strategy's focus on professional excellence. Leaders are also able to identify strengths and areas for support with greater precision, which has resulted in sharper and more impactful development planning.

At Trust level, IRIS Connect has created a cohesive professional learning community across our schools. It's supported cross-school coaching, the sharing of excellent practice and consistent quality assurance of teaching standards. The platform has been integral to delivering trust-wide initiatives, such as curriculum moderation and subject-specific CPD, ensuring alignment while still celebrating diverse strengths across settings. This reflects the 'collaborative excellence' strand of our strategy. It's also proved invaluable in accelerating the development of ECTs and middle leaders, helping to build sustainable leadership capacity across the trust.

This sustained focus on high quality, collaborative professional development is improving the consistency and effectiveness of teaching across our

schools. As a result, pupils' learning and outcomes are benefiting, which directly supports the strategy's goal of excellence for pupils.

### “Why should other schools consider using it?”

IRIS Connect is not only a robust and impactful platform, but one supported by a team that's highly accessible and responsive to schools' evolving needs. They have been genuine partners in our school improvement journey. We're currently collaborating in a working group focused on developing the use of AI within the platform, and exploring how AI can enhance professional reflection, streamline coaching feedback and improve insights into teacher development needs. This forward-thinking partnership reflects the innovative excellence strand of our Education Strategy. It gives us confidence that IRIS Connect will continue to be a central and progressive tool, genuinely useful for staff at every level across the trust.

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### • Video tools

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### • AI Insights

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### • Technique Guides

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# Paging the RESISTANCE

To counter the extremist messaging many students are now routinely exposed to online, we can turn to a resource all of us already use daily, suggests **Aaron Swan...**

**A** public death is always shocking and unexpected – and yet somehow, never outside the bounds of reality. Such seismic moments can seize the attention of even the most politically disinterested children and teens. If the moment was captured on camera, then many will already know all the details, having watched the uncensored footage. Depending on the circumstances and person involved, some may react with a sort of political hysteria adjacent to trauma – or even experience something akin to an identity crisis.

The worst political horror to unfold in my own experience of teaching was the death of George Floyd and its aftermath. Occurring in May of 2020, its impact stewed in the fallout following the first wave of COVID, when our students were in lockdown, far from the guidance and counsel of their school.

By the time they came back to us, we had students who had become traumatised by their unrestricted access to this content. Children who had repeatedly watched four officers detain Floyd, and continue watching as Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck. A victim begging for air. One struggling child told me they had watched the event maybe a hundred times, but it didn't take that degree of saturation for the damage to be done in others too.

## A concentration of power

The assassination of Charlie Kirk in September of 2025 posed a different set of challenges. Kirk wasn't a civilian in the wrong place; he was a Far Right influencer, whose death enabled the emergence of a new political narrative framed by clamorous accusations from both the political left and right.

Elliot Forhan, a Democratic candidate for Ohio attorney general, stated on social media that "*Charlie Kirk was a champion of tyranny, not democracy.*"

most from extremism, thanks to a concentration of power and ownership across the media sector.

## Algorithmic radicalisation

Meanwhile, on this side of the Atlantic, the adoption of nationalist agendas by mainstream parties such as Nigel Farage's Reform UK, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy and Gert Wilder's PVV and others (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-E1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-E1)) tells us that this isn't just an American disease, but one that's spreading globally.

England has been here

that requires a medicine.

Students will come to us for support with this stuff, but for various reasons, the educational orthodoxy compels teachers to shut down such conversations. The official advice is to respond with some variant of '*This isn't the right time or place*', or to '*Speak to [insert relevant middle management colleague] for support*'.

It's simply too difficult to provide appropriate counsel around such events in the middle of a packed teaching timetable. Students are instead signposted to counselling services (an avenue with long, yet typically unacknowledged lead times) and taught a PSHE curriculum that will occasionally cover such issues. There are also assemblies and community worship services, both of which can provide a space in which to issue reactive messaging informed by pressing current affairs.

## Cross-curricular resistance

As recently pointed out by the Children's Commissioner, children are often facing delays of six months to receive dedicated mental health support outside of school (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-E2](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-E2)). What's needed is some form of casual, yet structural everyday anti-radicalisation material that's tied into students' daily experiences.

Fortunately, there already exists a wealth of existing material that's ripe for countering this very problem,

## "Books challenge misrepresentations – they can immerse us in experiences of 'otherness'"

The Republican Secretary of State, Frank LaRose, has described Democratic speakers as being engaged in 'demented rhetoric'. Trump himself has repeatedly accused the 'radical left' of fostering the kind of rhetoric that led to Kirk's assassination.

Whose voices will carry the most weight in this propaganda war? Those already holding the megaphone? Those with the most social media followers? Those controlling the social media platforms? Thus far, it seems as though the American right-wing has, and will continue to profit

before. The murder of Labour MP Jo Cox in 2016 was a warning that we hadn't done enough to guard against the risks of online and offline Far Right radicalisation.

Today, students are watching more worrying political content than ever – unfiltered, autoplayed and deliberately targeted – that serves to fuel the rise of the radical right. There's a growing body of research showing how search and social media algorithms can unintentionally (or perhaps sometimes intentionally) amplify extremist ideologies, in a process of 'algorithmic radicalisation'. It's a toxin

produced by plenty of people who have long been preparing us for the moment we find ourselves in. Even better, you almost certainly have an extensive selection of these resources in your store cupboards already, so there needn't be that much involved in the way of costs. Many of you will have already been delivering the material for years. It just needs to be fully applied.

If, on the one hand, we have ultra-processed, hyper-promoted, addictive algorithmic radicalisation, then its foil is to be found in books – essential vittles for our character!

Moreover, books don't have to be the foundational material of literature courses alone; they need to become a cross-curricular amuse-bouche that can prepare us for the conceptual flavours of everything we study.

To help us explore and resist discriminatory

extremism, students have, for some time, been tasked with reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men* and others, so that through the medium of literature, we get to see the lived experiences of people of colour, and we could all help to build sympathy and develop a better understanding of the structural barriers they faced.

Texts present us with a 'narrative of representation', so that we can see how the world makes people appear to themselves and others. Most importantly, books challenge *misrepresentations* – they can immerse us in experiences of 'otherness', and how it feels to be excluded, stereotyped, and/or seen as deficient according to some 'exalted' standard (usually that of being white and male).

### Building a battle-ready curriculum

When thinking about the processes set in motion by Charlie Kirk's death, we should be turning to *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *An Inspector Calls* and *The Diary Of A Young Girl* by Anne Frank. These texts all utilise a political language that helps us see how fascism works – how it falsifies truth and undermines reality. They remind us of our responsibilities to wider society and of our interconnectedness, in ways that transcend the oft-derided terms 'socialism' and 'communism'.

What should our response be to the seemingly endless front pages and short-form videos that depict

immigrants as a faceless swarm of, counter-intuitively, benefits cheats and job thieves? We should be reading *Refugee* by Alan Gratz, *The Boy At The Back Of The Class* by Onjali Q. Rauf, *We Are Displaced* by Malala Yousafzai, and more.

Students should get to imagine life in the clothes of other nationals, so that we can better feel what it's like to have a home, culture and dream wrecked by empowered extremism.

What would delivering such a reading culture look like in practice?

This is something our school is currently attempting – a curriculum of books delivered to all students, once per term, per year group, each with a different curricular link, amounting to 18 books by the end of KS3.

A critical curriculum, delivered through literature, that's readily available to all students, provides a means of understanding reality. During the first 10 minutes of each lesson, the teacher will continue the narrative from the point reached by the previous teacher. It's important that the teacher reads, and does justice to the sensitivities conveyed by the text.

We then discuss these narrative experiences: how they relate to the real world, and how seeing them on the page can impact our own individual conceptions of reality. Throughout the year, teachers and curriculums across the school can reference back to these texts which exemplify the disciplinary critical language. Importantly, we're recalling the *emotional impact* of this critical language – not just the cognition.

It's a curriculum delivered by all subjects simultaneously; one formed of 18 books that could conceivably be found on the shelves of any classroom. And all it takes is just 10 minutes at the start of each lesson, for two weeks in each term. That's two weeks of starter activities, reading about the world as made fictional, and responding to these moderately and safely, when the world outside seems all too real.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

## [ MATHS PROBLEM ]

# SOLVING SIMULTANEOUS EQUATIONS

Setting up and solving simultaneous equations from a context is often challenging, says **Colin Foster**

In this lesson, students use a Fibonacci-like sequence as context for simultaneous equations

## THE DIFFICULTY

From the third box onwards, the number in each box below is the sum of the numbers in the **two** previous boxes.

1	2	3	5	8	13
---	---	---	---	---	----

Can you find the missing numbers here?

5		9			
---	--	---	--	--	--

The second box must be  $9 - 5 = 4$ , and it then follows that the three final boxes must be 13, 22 and 35.

Now try this one:

		16			62
--	--	----	--	--	----

Although, again, two numbers are given, this one is much harder, because we don't know either of the two starting numbers (only their sum). If no one can do it, this nicely sets up the motivation for the main activity.

## THE SOLUTION

These box puzzles are very easy to make up, by choosing the first two numbers and doing the additions. But they can be hard to solve, and involve a lot of trial and improvement. Alternatively, we can use algebra to make it much easier.

We will let  $a$  and  $b$  represent the first two numbers (whether known or not).

Can you find the missing **expressions** here?

$a$	$b$					
-----	-----	--	--	--	--	--

The complete sequence is

$a$	$b$	$a + b$	$a + 2b$	$2a + 3b$	$3a + 5b$
-----	-----	---------	----------	-----------	-----------

Learners will notice that the coefficients match the numbers that were in the first set of boxes presented at the start, and that these are called the **Fibonacci numbers** ((1), 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21...).

How can you use these expressions to solve the difficult box puzzle above?

Learners will see that  $a + b$  must be equal to 16 and  $3a + 5b$  must be equal to 62. Now learners can practise solving these equations simultaneously by elimination:

$$\begin{aligned} a + b &= 16 & (1) \\ 3a + 5b &= 62 & (2) \\ 3a + 3b &= 48 & (3) = 3 \times (1) \\ 2b &= 14 & (2) - (3) \\ b &= 7 \\ a + 7 &= 16 & (1) \\ a &= 9 \end{aligned}$$

This means that the complete sequence must be 9, 7, 16, 23, 39, 62.

## Checking for understanding

Make up another puzzle like this one, but with the given numbers in different positions. See if your partner can use simultaneous equations to solve it. Which positions of the given numbers make the puzzle harder or easier? Why?

Students could try using more than 6 boxes or changing the 'sum of two previous numbers' rule. They could also try making a set of puzzles of gradually increasing difficulty.



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

# LEARNING LAB

## IN THIS ISSUE

- + How a community partnership project in the North East helped schools boost their student attendance
- + The meaning of 'withitness', and the advantages it can confer upon your behaviour management skills
- + 4 ways to keep students motivated during MFL lessons
- + Since 2015, the Youth Sport Trust has been projecting how physically active children and young people will be by 2035 – so how are things shaping up?
- + The key lessons that one Teach First graduate took away from her initial in-school training
- + How leaders can ensure that staff are with them as they embark on an AI journey of discovery
- + Help your students keep their cognitive load in check with Zeph Bennett's helpful tips

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### BEVERLY CLARKE MBE

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Thinking about ...

## FUN AND LAUGHTER

**L**et's kick things off with a radical notion – *school should be fun*.

Yes, fun. That thing often exiled to Friday afternoons, school trips and the last 10 minutes of a lesson if everyone behaves. But what if fun – real, soul-lifting, laughter-inducing, brain-buzzing fun – wasn't seen as the sideshow, but rather the main event?

Let's continue with another radical notion – that *joy is the key to it all*. For learners aged 11 to 16, right in the eye of the hormonal hurricane, joy isn't a fluffy extra. I'd go so far as to say that it's a lifeline. When the world feels overwhelming, when your identity is a puzzle missing half the pieces, when your phone's become so intertwined with your social life that it's now a pocket-sized portal to drama, validation, and the ever-scrolling story of who you are, joy becomes *essential*.

By 'joy', I don't mean balloons and bouncy castles (though I'm a big advocate for both); I'm talking about laughter in lessons. Banter that builds connections. Teachers who aren't afraid to be daft and schools that create space for silliness. Because when we laugh, we learn. When we smile, we remember. And when we play, that's when we let go. We're present. We're more ready to engage.

Professor Stuart Brown said it best when he described play as being 'like oxygen'. It's all around us, but we don't really notice it until it's gone. And for a lot of us, it feels like it's been gone for a while.

Too often, education can feel like a grind in the service of a huge, beige, results-obsessed machine. The 'cult of serious', as I call it, marches kids

through corridors of compliance, slowly siphoning the colour from their days. Yes, data matters, but children aren't data points, nor are they robots in revision factories. They're beautifully weird, emotionally elastic and gloriously curious beings. And they're wired for joy.

What if we stopped seeing joy as a distraction from learning, and instead started seeing it as the key ingredient? I can tell you right now that joy is the secret, not the reward, of inspiration – because where joy leads, innovation surely follows.

Fun builds relationships. It opens the door to trust and creates safety. Brains do their best work in safe spaces. When laughter echoes through the classroom, cortisol drops and oxytocin rises. Students feel seen. They belong. And belonging is the soil in which confidence, creativity and resilience grow.

I'm not saying we should ditch the entirety of the curriculum in favour of opening a comedy club, but we can rewrite the unwritten rules of what 'serious learning' looks like. That means embracing the awkward, celebrating the absurd and letting kids know it's okay to laugh, even when learning is hard.

Because let's face it – life is hard, and for many young people, school will be the only place where joy might find them that day. We have the chance – the responsibility, really – to light that spark. Laughter doesn't water down learning. It deepens it. Fun doesn't replace rigour. It fuels it.

In our big, increasingly shouty and bonkers world, our classrooms must be spaces where joy isn't just welcomed, but a visible part of the school's DNA.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gavin Oattes is a former primary school teacher, managing director of Tree of Knowledge and author of *Confidently Lost: Finding Joy in the Chaos and Rediscovering What Matters Most in Life* (£12.99, Capstone).

## FOCUS ON... ABSENTEEISM

Across England, persistent absence remains a significant barrier to pupil progress, with attendance rates yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Recent national data shows that persistent absence has dipped marginally – from 6.93% in the first term of the 2023/24 academic year, to 6.63% at the same point in 2024/25 – but it's far from the level of improvement that's needed.

When pupils stop attending school regularly, there will be a combination of academic, emotional and social factors involved. Once a pupil disengages, their relationship with education becomes difficult to rebuild. The challenge isn't just one of bringing pupils back, but also helping them feel that school *matters* – which is where community partnerships offer transformational potential.

Too often, conversations around attendance are focused solely on the classroom. Young people thrive when they feel seen and supported by their school, but also by the communities around them.

Strong community partnerships with local businesses and charities can unite schools, families and those organisations under a shared sense of responsibility for young people. These partnerships can take different forms, and focus on different areas – such as sport, creative pursuits, youth work or volunteering – but the goal remains consistent: to make education relevant, personal and above all, rooted in real experience.

**PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE**  
When pupils meet mentors who share their background

and values, they can start to see their education through a different lens, and come to appreciate how school can open doors for them.

The 'North East United' pilot initiative was created to test this principle. Developed and led by The Edwin Group (see [edwin.group](http://edwin.group)) and supported by three MATs based in the North East – including Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust – it brought together the charitable football foundations of Newcastle United, Sunderland AFC and Middlesbrough FC to re-engage pupils at risk of disconnecting from education.

Over 12 weeks, pupils explored the areas of teamwork, aspiration and emotional wellbeing through a mix of sport activities and life skills mentoring. Focusing on Y10 pupils – the point when pupils are most likely to disengage – the programme provided access to positive coaches and role models from the participating football foundations, who helped pupils rebuild their confidence and rediscover their motivation for learning.

The results were striking. Pupils on the programme increased their attendance from 86.22% to 87.24%, with individual improvements of up to 40 percentage points in some cases. Crucially, 91% of pupils subsequently stated feeling more positive about attending school, with 71% reporting increased levels of confidence.

At St John's Catholic



## DO THIS

### 'WITHITNESS'

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

The term 'withitness' was first coined by Jacob Kounin in the late 1960s, to refer to three key elements of teacher awareness. In his view, the 'withit' teacher...

- Knows (or has a good idea of) what their students are doing at any given time
- Similarly knows (or can easily predict) what their students will do in any given situation
- Conveys their awareness of the above to the class

School and Sixth Form College, average attendance rose above 90% by the end of the 2024/25 summer term. The most telling outcome was that pupils began setting their own goals, with 64% saying that they wanted to maintain attendance rates of 90% or higher in future.

### LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons here for schools and trusts is that robust community partnerships can play a key role in rebuilding sustained engagement when guided by the following core principles:

- 1 Schools should identify local community organisations that align with their mission and values, and are authentic to pupils.
- 2 Any partnerships should be collaborative, with schools, families and other organisations all playing an active role.
- 3 Celebrating small wins quickly and visibly can fuel pupils' motivation.
- 4 The mentor/pupil bond can be a powerful lever for change
- 5 Consistency matters more than complexity

North East United has shown how schools can transform attendance by building meaningful community partnerships with a shared purpose, which can in turn support those pupils who feel disconnected from learning. Once pupils feel that they belong, they will show up, engage and achieve.

Withitness comes from closely observing students, thinking about what you see and registering patterns of behaviour both pertaining to the entire class and to specific individuals. It's about reading the room and the individuals within it.

It's also about spotting those mini behaviours that can become mini misbehaviours and intervening quickly. In short, the withit teacher knows what's going on, and demonstrates that awareness by actively managing the class.

The opposite of withitness is 'withoutitness'. Here, the teacher doesn't know what the students are doing, or what they might do in different situations, thus putting them on the behaviour management back foot. Consequently, they tend to respond in the moment, rather than take a preventative approach, and will often be slow to intervene. Hence, the misbehaviour gets worse, making it even harder to deal with.

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



SARAH MONK IS CHIEF STRATEGY OFFICER AT EDWIN; BRENDAN TAPPING IS CEO AT BISHOP CHADWICK CATHOLIC EDUCATION TRUST

# 76%

of secondary school pupils are worried about their chances of being able to attend university, secure an apprenticeship or find a job when they leave school.

Source: Nationally representative poll conducted by J.L. Partners on behalf of Teach First

Qualifications in subjects such as computing, IT and D&T can do more to boost outcomes for lower attaining students at an earlier stage compared to other subjects. That's the conclusion of a new NFER report – 'The Tech Pipeline – Investigating educational pathways into the tech sector in England' – which examines current educational pathways in relation to wider labour trends across the tech sector. Its findings include the detail that those opting for Level 3 vocational qualifications or tech-related degrees tend to have lower GCSE results compared to their peers, but will often be earning more than those peers – on average, by as much as £2,000 – by the age of 28. Apprentices in tech subjects were similarly found to have had lower GCSE results than fellow apprentices pursuing other fields, only to out-earn them soon after.

As James Turner, Chief Executive of the Hg Foundation (which funded the research) observes, "Tech and STEM qualifications, combined with AI and data literacy, strong essential skills and real-world work experience, offer a strong platform for social mobility in an uncertain and rapidly changing tech labour market."

A key takeaway from the report, however, is that entry-level hires are down overall, with employers prioritising those candidates able to demonstrate practical digital skills, problem-solving abilities and adaptability.

Other less positive developments highlighted by the report include the finding that students from lower income backgrounds are less likely to study tech subjects below degree level to start with, or indeed work in the tech sector – something that the report's authors put down to differences in prior GCSE attainment. More troubling was evidence cited by the report that tech workers from ethnic minorities earn less at the age of 28 than their white counterparts.

Read the full report via [tinyurl.com/ts151-LL3](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-LL3)

## HOW TO...

### MOTIVATE YOUR MFL LEARNERS

*"One day I will speak fluent German!"* That was the promise I made to myself after another inspiring lesson at my comprehensive school in the Midlands. Well, I achieved that goal, and my life since then has been enriched by the opportunities and experiences that learning languages has given me.

As MFL teachers, we want our students to feel that same spark for learning a language. We want them to aspire to communicate confidently and accurately, whilst connecting with the culture behind the language. Yet at GCSE, that enthusiasm can start to dip as lessons become dominated by heavy curriculum content, assessments and exam pressures. So how do we keep students' motivation high when the going gets tough?

#### 1. START WITH SPEAKING

Getting students talking is my number one priority, so I aim to include speaking in every lesson from the start of KS3. As students get older, their inhibitions grow, so building confidence early on is essential. One of my favourite speaking activities is 'Quatschen' – German for 'chatting rubbish'. I play an upbeat German pop song, give students prompts and colloquialisms (a list we co-create in class based on student interest) and let them wander around the classroom chatting to each other for the duration of the track. The only rule – speak German! The music and movement creates a fun, less daunting atmosphere in which students can build their verbal confidence.

#### 2. MAKE EXAM PREP MORE ENGAGING

Exam technique matters, but it needn't be dry. When introducing the 'photocard task', I'll teach the key structures first, then show the students some silly pictures to encourage them to play around with the language. I also like using



online maps to drop into random locations in German-speaking countries and describe what we see – it's exciting, builds confidence and makes speaking feel more natural.

#### 3. BRING CULTURE TO LIFE

Culture makes language meaningful. Whether describing a photocard of 'das Oktoberfest', or listening to the latest music by singer Lena to practise complex opinions, real life content can spark students' curiosity.

#### 4. PRACTICE GROAN-FREE GRAMMAR

Self-determination theory (see [tinyurl.com/ts151-LL1](http://tinyurl.com/ts151-LL1)) posits that giving students autonomy boosts their motivation to learn. I personally like to use flipped learning, by giving students a task to complete ahead of my lessons. I would typically ask them to research a grammar concept on BBC Bitesize, then bring their notes and questions into class and assume an active role in their learning. The resources in question contain quizzes, so that students can practise what they've learnt. Using digital platforms in this way can free up often scarce lesson time and provide opportunities for independent practice at home.

Striking the right balance between effective exam preparation and authentic language use isn't easy, but it is possible. By building confidence in speaking, embedding culture and using digital tools to save time and empower learners, we can keep that motivation flame alive – even at GCSE.



CLAIRE WILSON IS AN EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANT FOR BBC BITESIZE; A SERIES OF NEW GERMAN MFL RESOURCES WILL BE AVAILABLE ON THE SITE IN TIME FOR THE SPRING TERM, FURTHER DETAILS OF WHICH CAN BE FOUND VIA [TINYURL.COM/TS151-LL2](http://TINYURL.COM/TS151-LL2)

# 27,836

The total number of ITT entrants recorded for the 2024/25 academic year – up 6% on the entries for 2023/24

Source: DfE

## Need to know

The Youth Sport Trust has published its third 'Class of 2035' report, which aims to present a picture of what children's attitudes and behaviours regarding physical activity will look like in that titular year, assuming no further change or action by then.

The organisation published its first such reports in 2015 and 2020, then focusing primarily on the benefits of PE for social development, and the impact of digital technologies on play and sport. For the 2025 instalment, the Youth Sport Trust has turned to AI to predict the ways in which children's development is likely to change according to how much they engage in play and sport over the coming decade.

The resulting numbers include the stark projection that 48% of children will spend three or more hours on daily screen entertainment by 2035 (up 34% from current levels) and that 34% won't meet the threshold of being active for at least 30 minutes each day. The report also highlights that Type 2 diabetes diagnoses in children will exceed 500 new cases annually.

For more information, visit [youthsporttrust.org](https://youthsporttrust.org)



## WHAT I'VE LEARNT ABOUT... CPD DURING ITT

*"Five... four – pens out of our hands – three... and we're back in STAR... two tracking me... one. Wait, no. Let me try that again." I shuffled on the spot and took a deep breath before restarting.*

*"And we're back in STAR in five... four – tracking this way – in three... two – making sure our hands are empty... one."*

*"Much better!"* exclaimed the leader of the INSET session.

*"It'll become second nature soon, don't worry,"* someone said afterwards, as we left the training session.

Later, stood in my new classroom gazing at the rows of desks that would soon be filled with students the following day, I wasn't so sure. If I was stumbling over something as simple as a countdown, how on earth would I ever teach a lesson – let alone two years of proper lessons?

### GETTING STARTED

The training I'd received from Teach First over the summer holidays had been predominantly online, with one week spent at an exemplar school. Over Zoom, we'd discussed the basics of planning for learning, classroom management in the abstract and the power of body language in making a good first impression.

We knew just enough to get started, but nowhere near enough to understand just how challenging the coming academic year would be.

I was lucky in that the school I'd been allocated to placed a real emphasis on practice. Most weeks, staff would assemble and rehearse responses to challenging scenarios, with positive framing and de-escalating language always at the fore.

This could feel silly at times – role-playing a rude Y11 student, for instance – but it was hugely helpful having a script I could refer to for how to approach the kind of difficult situations that teaching inevitably entails.

### CASUAL OBSERVATIONS

My textbook Teach Firster's misguided ambition to be a 'great teacher' from the off was quickly replaced by awe at seeing these senior colleagues in action – skilled professionals who had honed their craft over time.

I was encouraged to regularly drop in on lessons across all subject areas, and note down any practice that I might want to copy. From deputy heads to ECTs, everyone knew to expect regular casual observations and feedback. Though intimidating at first, this proved to be the most effective catalyst for my professional development.

I'm still indebted to this network of colleagues who were so generous with their advice and experiences. Through watching them, their successes came to feel replicable. Their routines became my routines. Their strategies for more challenging students became indispensable go-tos.

Above all, I feel indebted to my mentor, who completed Teach First years before me. She embodied a winning combination of creativity and pragmatism, letting me try out new teaching strategies, so long as I later analysed their benefits and flaws. From the start, we collaborated on solutions and strategies, with my autonomy and judgment given as much space as her own professional experience. It was a partnership that I found to be incredibly empowering, in an environment that could sometimes feel overwhelming.

At the end of my two years, it was gratifying to look back and recognise how far I'd come, and how much of that was entirely attributable to the input and advice of my colleagues. My experience of Teach First led me to see how a school that encourages curiosity and risk-taking among both staff and students will be one where the best kind of learning takes place.



OLIVIA DUNN IS A TEACH FIRST GRADUATE, HAVING COMPLETED HER TEACHER TRAINING AT A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN HACKNEY; FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT TEACH FIRST, VISIT [TEACHFIRST.ORG.UK](https://teachfirst.org)



On the radar...

## AI journey essentials

A key challenge for school leaders about to embark on an AI school journey is how to ensure they take school staff (as well as pupils and parents/guardians) with them. A good place to start would be to devise a shared vision – explain the ‘why’, and link this to your school development plan and departmental priorities. Ensure that all policies reference the usage and deployment of AI as necessary, and that any risks relating to bias, data security and equitable access to AI tools are fully addressed.

Next, share a training plan detailing how all staff will be affected by your AI vision and tailor this to specific teams – e.g. admin staff, school business managers, SLT and

teachers. With staff trained, you can then consider your pupils’ needs. Where and when will they be using AI, and how will this vary across subjects?

Keep in mind that AI should be used to augment great teaching, not replace it, so consider how teachers will likely use it. Tasking students with summarising passages of writing, for instance, makes little sense when an AI model can do that instantly. Instead, pupils could be engaged in classroom debate, enabling them to develop important communication and critical thinking skills.

Put in place key impact milestones to measure your progress at both whole school and departmental levels, and

invite regular feedback from all involved parties. You’ll soon find out if your school’s adoption of AI is having the desired outcomes in terms of workloads and personalised learning.

The current evidence base of AI deployment within schools isn’t huge, with many more examples of use and impact needed to inform future developments – so be as transparent as possible when reporting any challenges you encountered and how you dealt with them.

**Beverly Clarke MBE** is an education consultant, speaker and author; for more information, visit [beverlyclarkeconsulting.co.uk](http://beverlyclarkeconsulting.co.uk)

## TRENDING

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

### SUPERVISING THE SUPERVISORS

The Engagement Platform (TEP) began as a tool for measuring student engagement, and informing actions around school attendance, outcomes and other areas. It’s now in the process of expanding into leadership and governance, with a new set of tools designed to gauge how well a school’s SLT, governors and trustees are aligned in their priorities and perceptions. [tep.uk/leadership-governance](http://tep.uk/leadership-governance)

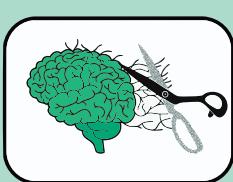
### THE LIGHT FANTASTIC

Any KS3 groups planning to take in the revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Starlight Express* at Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre can avail themselves of a free education pack containing a range of learning activities for use both before and after seeing the show. [starlightexpresslondon.com/education](http://starlightexpresslondon.com/education)

## 1 MINUTE STUDENT CPD

### 5 WAYS TO REDUCE COGNITIVE LOAD

ZEPH BENNETT SUGGESTS SOME WAYS OF PREVENTING STUDENTS FROM BEING OVERWHELMED WHEN PRESENTED WITH NEW INFORMATION



1

#### CUT IRRELEVANT MATERIAL

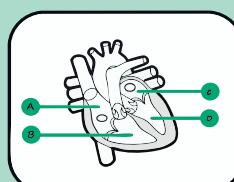
Present relevant information via short, sharp sentences; if using diagrams, explain the point succinctly without excessive labelling or noise.



2

#### DON'T READ OUT TEXT ON THE BOARD

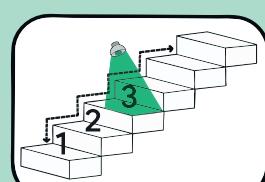
Reading out material put before students can muddle their input channel. They can be listening to you, or reading the board, but not both.



3

#### BREAK UP TEXT WITH IMAGES

You should, however, combine images with text on the board, so that the former lend the material immediate impact, while that latter provide clear explanations.



4

#### SEGMENT COMPLEX INFORMATION

Presenting content in small chunks, so that it’s delivered in a bite-sized, yet progressive way, will aid students’ encoding of new material.



5

#### HIGHLIGHT KEY INFORMATION

When presenting text, draw students’ attention to the most important points through devices such as bold text and indented paragraphs.

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](mailto:editor@teachsecondary.com) or tweet us at @teachsecondary



# Ready... Set... Retire!

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- ▶ Help you to fund the things that matter most to you
- ▶ Explain the Teachers' Pension Scheme to you and your loved ones
- ▶ Assess if you could afford to take early retirement or reduce your hours
- ▶ Support you in accessing your pension pots

## Ready to prepare and plan for your retirement?

If you'd like to find out more about how Wesleyan Financial Services can help, visit [wesleyan.co.uk/retirement-teach-secondary](http://wesleyan.co.uk/retirement-teach-secondary)

Charges may apply. We will not charge you until you have agreed the services you require and the associated costs.

Advice is provided by Wesleyan Financial Services Ltd.

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# What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

## 1 Improving outcomes

Academy21's GCSE Booster Series provides time-limited interventions to support KS4 learners and boost their chances of exam success. The series includes targeted GCSE Booster courses for progress and confidence, as well as dedicated GCSE Resit Booster courses offering targeted content for maths and English retakes.

Bespoke Booster groups are also available, providing tailored provision for each school and commissioned on-demand – often as closed cohorts for individual schools or trusts. All sessions are delivered live by subject-specialist teachers and complement in-school delivery. Learn more at [academy21.co.uk](http://academy21.co.uk).



## 2 A legacy of change

The Diana Award benefits from the support of HRH The Prince of Wales and Prince Harry, The Duke of Sussex, having been founded as a lasting legacy to the belief of their mother, Diana, Princess of Wales, that young people have in them the power to change the world. The charity fosters, develops and inspires positive change in the lives of young people through three key programmes. These include a mentoring programme, a youth-led anti-bullying ambassadors campaign and the prestigious Diana Award itself, which publicly recognises young changemakers. For more information, visit [diana-award.org.uk](http://diana-award.org.uk).



## 3 Open your students' eyes

Looking to bridge the gap between your classroom and future careers? Rise has you covered. Developed in partnership with Causeway Education and Rise partners, our suite of free classroom resources for students aged 11-16 are designed to save you time and enrich your students' learning.



Ideal for use either in class or set as homework, our KS3/4 resources will open your students' eyes to a wide range of industries and inspiring job roles, as well as the essential skills they'll need to succeed in life and their future careers. The resources are all free, with no sign-up required – find out more and download them today at [rise-initiative.co.uk/resources](http://rise-initiative.co.uk/resources).

# 4Matrix

Performance Tools for Schools and Trusts

## Analyse, compare, forecast

4Matrix is provided by New Media Learning Ltd – the UK's largest independent data solutions provider to secondary schools. 4Matrix offers a powerful suite of tools to help schools and trusts obtain the maximum value from their performance data.

Key features include intuitive dashboards, interactive charts and tables, pupil photo reports and seamless MIS integration. Analyse, compare, forecast and report on subject performance, the progress made by different groups of pupils, the consistency and impact of teaching and other key performance indicators.

With 4Matrix, schools gain the insight needed to drive improvement and make informed, data-led decisions. For more details, visit [4matrix.com](http://4matrix.com).



## 5 Under one roof

Imagine a school day where admin, people management, finances, and parent communication flow together in perfect orchestration. That's the reality with Access Education's fully integrated suite: one platform that brings everything under one roof, from staff management and budgeting to student curriculum resources.

It's easy to set up, and backed by expert support that keeps your team smiling. And with Access Evo – our software engine that turns data into action – it helps you adapt in real time and keep every student on track.

This is school life, amplified. Access Education, growing with you, giving you the freedom to put education first. Find out more at [www.theaccessgroup.com/education](http://www.theaccessgroup.com/education).

## 6 Will you host Willy Russell in your school?

The Methuen Drama team over at Bloomsbury Publishing has just launched an exciting competition for all secondary school students aged 14-19. Continuing the celebrations around their newly published Methuen Drama Student Edition of *Blood Brothers*, they're encouraging all students to write their own original scene on the theme of social class.

The winning entry will host Willy Russell in a live Q&A session at their school, PLUS win a *Blood Brothers* workshop from Stage-Ed ([stage-ed.com](http://stage-ed.com)) and a class set of the *Blood Brothers* Student Edition! Download your entry pack at [bloomsbury.com/Blood-Brothers](http://bloomsbury.com/Blood-Brothers) – the closing date for entries is 17th April 2026.



## 7 Everything you need to teach media and information literacy

In a world where anyone can publish anything, young people are growing up in an environment where information is fast, fragmented and not always trustworthy. The First News TeachKit: MIL makes teaching media and information literacy easy, with clear progressive frameworks, fully resourced schemes of work, dynamic teaching packs and plenty of teacher support.

Lessons are updated fortnightly using the latest news – even difficult events – to spark safe, meaningful discussion; visit [firstnews.co.uk/mil](http://firstnews.co.uk/mil) to find out more about how to develop your students as capable and confident consumers, and creators of media and information who will be ready to question, challenge and positively shape the world around them.



Boston, SkiBound handles the details so that you can focus on the experience.

Its trips are fully bonded by ABTA and ATOL, and meet rigorous School Travel Forum and LotC Quality Badge standards, giving you complete peace of mind. With expert planning and après activities that build confidence, teamwork and independence, SkiBound helps students create memories that last a lifetime. To find out how you can plan the ultimate school ski experience, visit [skibound.co.uk](http://skibound.co.uk) or call 01273 244 570.

## 8 Hit the slopes

SkiBound makes organising a school ski trip simple, safe and unforgettable. From doorstep skiing at its exclusive French Clubhotels, to a North American adventure with exciting city stopovers at iconic cities like New York and



## Coaching and reflection

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# Barrington Stoke Editions – Shakespeare

Open up The Bard's words to everyone with these dyslexia-friendly books

## AT A GLANCE

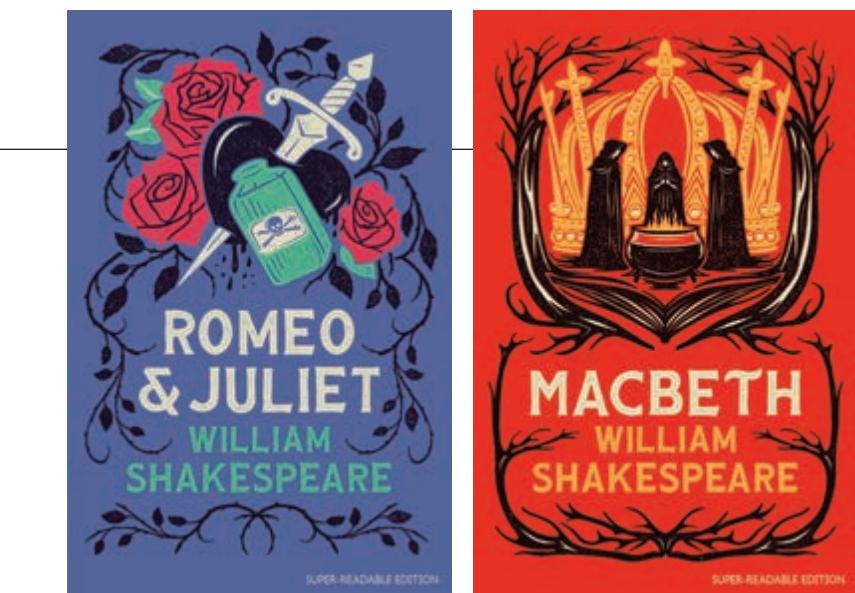
- Super-readable, dyslexia-friendly books for students studying Shakespeare
- Visually optimised for dyslexic readers
- Both feature a specially designed font and use of tinted paper
- Thoughtful layout choices remove barriers to reading

REVIEWED BY: JOHN DABELL

Without the right kind of support and resourcing in place, students with dyslexia risk falling behind academically and facing reduced life chances. Given the poor outcomes and personal struggles typically associated with dyslexia, teachers are understandably keen to make use of interventions and supports that can successfully improve reading outcomes for this group – and yet in the majority of schools you're unlikely to encounter an especially wide choice when it comes to dyslexia-friendly books.

Thankfully, however, Barrington Stoke is on hand to help plug the gap, being a specialist publisher of books produced with the needs of dyslexic readers of all abilities very much in mind. As such, it knows full well that students with dyslexia specifically experience difficulties with processing written information, and gives this due consideration when it comes to the 'user experience' of its titles.

The books under consideration here – specialist editions of those Shakespearean mainstays *Romeo & Juliet* and *Macbeth* – therefore employ a unique, dyslexia-friendly typeface to facilitate smoother and easier reading, combined with highly accessible, clutter-free layouts and generous spacing to allow for student notes. Moreover, the pages in question are printed on an off-white heavier paper



stock designed to reduce visual stress and improve focus by preventing overleaf print from showing through.

Seemingly small features like this ultimately combine to make a huge difference, by removing barriers to reading, building confidence and promoting inclusion in the classroom.

As for the content of these recent additions to the Barrington Stoke catalogue, you'll already know that they're two of Shakespeare's most famous plays. Both include the full, unabridged text, based on the 'Alexander Text' of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (but no foreword or explanatory content, making them suitable for the exam hall), and are presented as fully accessible versions, complete with larger print, easy-to-read fonts and expanded line spacing on matt buff paper.

At the end of the day, all reading is good reading, right? Not if you happen to be dyslexic, and only have access to texts that are at odds with your needs. What makes these books stand out is that they emphasise accessibility first and foremost, attend to the considerations that really matter and go all-in on friendly formatting.

The publication of dyslexia-friendly books like this is an essential step towards making great literature available to everyone. They're the sort of thoughtful,

yet essential resources that can facilitate an easier reading experience and greater inclusion at a stroke – when used by capable teachers implementing carefully considered practice, of course...

## teach SECONDARY

## VERDICT

- ✓ Reduces visual noise and supports comprehension
- ✓ Excellent use of design, layouts and paper selection
- ✓ Generous line, character and word spacing
- ✓ Ideal for all students with additional literacy or neurodiversity needs
- ✓ Effective, accessible and enjoyable

## PICK UP IF...

You're looking for accessible Shakespeare editions optimised for dyslexic readers, by specialists with considerable expertise.

## STATIONERY



# YPO Refillable Whiteboard Pens

Economical and environmentally responsible dry-wipe markers for busy classrooms



## AT A GLANCE

- Dry-wipe felt tip pens for everyday whiteboard work
- Easily refillable using specially designed ink bottles
- Made from 90% recycled materials
- Robust and chunky enough to suit hands of all sizes
- Available in a range of colours and nib sizes

REVIEWED BY: MIKE DAVIES

I'm old enough to remember what a boon it was for classroom practice when individual dry-wipe boards became available. They were a great way to immediately gauge understanding, without having to resort to targeting questions at the usual suspects, or recourse to the lottery of drawing names on lolly sticks at random out of a hat.

It might seem like a small thing to the uninitiated, but it was so useful to have the whole class simultaneously showing me their proposed answers to questions. Teachers being teachers, they could probably enthusiastically explain a hundred other ways in which they use them in their lessons.

The trouble was, those markers seemed to run out depressingly quickly. It took me back to the childhood disappointment of receiving a brand new pack of felt tips, only to find them drying to scratchy uselessness after what seemed like just a picture or two.

Similarly, as a teacher, I can remember that sinking feeling as my supply of replacement whiteboard pens steadily dwindled, adding to the world's pile of discarded plastic in the process. How soothed my conscience would have been if only we'd been using YPO's refillable whiteboard markers...

First things first, these dry-wipe markers perform as well as any others I've ever encountered. The ink flows smoothly, and whatever mark you've made wipes clear easily. What's different here, as the name suggests, is that their ink can be topped up as many as 35 times. When you think about how many classes they could be used in, that's a huge amount of waste avoided. And they're already made of 90% recycled materials to start with.

Refilling them is easy. Simply open the refill bottle, pop in the pen and leave for an hour or so. No mess, no fuss – job done. They come in four different colours – black, red, blue and green – with a variety of nib sizes and styles on offer, including 'chisel', 'broad', 'bullet' and 'fine'. Gauges are clearly marked on the outside of each marker, so you don't have to scrabble through boxes and remove lids to find the one you want. Personally, I really appreciate thoughtful little design considerations like this.

I suspect my internet price comparison skills aren't foolproof, but from what I can tell, it would appear that these YPO pens will represent remarkably good value even if you use them just once, let alone refilling 35 times.

To give you some idea of the potential savings, a pack of 50 black fine tip pens is

available from just £15.99 + VAT. With refill bottles which can be used up to 25 times, going for around £3 + VAT, it's not hard to see how they make good economic as well as environmental sense.



## teach SECONDARY

## VERDICT

- ✓ Reliable and comfortable
- ✓ Perfect for classroom use
- ✓ Easy to refill
- ✓ Environmentally sound
- ✓ Great value

## UPGRADE IF...

... you want to continue enjoying the benefits of whiteboard work in a way that's both environmentally responsible and economically beneficial.

Prices start at only £15.99 + VAT for a pack of 50; find out more at [ypo.co.uk](http://ypo.co.uk)



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Lawson is a former secondary teacher, now serving as a foundation governor while running a tutoring service, and author of the book **The Successful (Less Stressful) Student** (Outskirts Press, £11.95); find out more at [prep4successnow.wordpress.com](http://prep4successnow.wordpress.com) or follow @johninpompano

#### THE LAST WORD

# "If nothing changes, nothing changes"



**John Lawson** reflects on how he was looking for inspiring examples of school leadership and modern teaching, and found both in abundance at The Duston School, Northampton...

Last year, I sent a 'welcome letter' to Bridget Phillipson, making two observations. First, that there are teachers in every staffroom who have forgotten more about education than she will ever know. Second, that she should find ways to connect with engaging educators to find out how they manage to achieve so much in such diverse communities.

Phillipson didn't respond, but having piqued my own interest, I went ahead and tried opening up conversations with a number of dynamic leaders who have been able to create and oversee successful schools.

#### Raising the bar

Sam Strickland took charge at The Duston School, a huge all-through school in Northampton, in April 2017, and soon realised that the interview panel had underestimated the scale of the school's challenges.

The school's last Ofsted inspection the previous year had resulted in a Requires Improvement rating that was considered 'charitable' by a number of teachers who resigned soon after the inspection was complete. It's difficult to remain upbeat and committed to education when students seem to prefer vandalism and fighting each other – and their teachers – over studying. But for Strickland geography wasn't destiny. He knew that the bar could be raised for everyone at Duston.

What was holding the Duston back from being one of England's finest state schools? Nothing insurmountable! Strickland understood that *'If nothing changes, nothing changes'*. Changing the students' behaviour and attitudes thus became his top priorities.

#### A purposeful learning environment

Teachers need experienced and supportive mentors who can show them how to teach, build relationships and manage behaviour humanely, since constructive discipline is a gift, not a curse. Adults who try to browbeat teenagers into conformity are the beaten ones.

Respect is a two-way street, but actually achieving that means getting everyone working together to create win-win situations. Strickland possesses a few striking superpowers. He looks, listens and never ceases to learn, and has shared his wisdom in teacher-empowering books that include *The Behaviour Manual* and *Is Leadership a Race?*

Walking through the hallways of The Duston School, the only voices you can hear coming from the classrooms are those of teachers or students asking polite questions. Every classroom door is kept open, and yet, despite there being a combined 2,000+ pupils spread across those rooms, *there is no yelling*. Wherever you look, there are just engaging teachers enthusiastically sharing their rich knowledge and expertise with highly focused students.

Rebecca Churchill, a maths teacher at the school, proudly tells me that she feels blessed to teach in a learning environment that is purposeful to the extent that disruptive behaviour is actively discouraged by the students themselves.

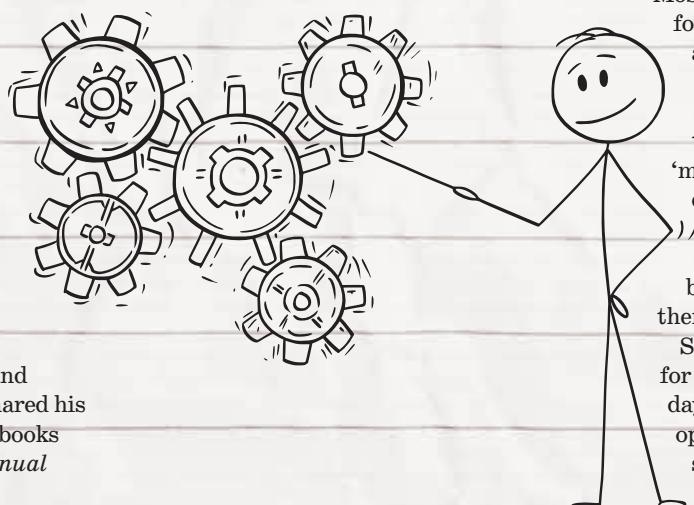
#### Marginal gains

Have these pupils not experienced difficulties in their lives outside of school? Some have, of course – but they ultimately know that abusing teachers, refusing to follow reasonable rules and bullying their peers aren't acceptable responses to whatever challenges they might be going through. When Duston students need help and support, they know that school staff genuinely care about them and want to support them.

The two Y13 students who showed me around the school, Charlotte and Sadie, were as delightful as any teenagers I've ever met. Both were proud of their school, confident that it was preparing them for the challenges of university life and beyond, and respected their teachers for providing an ultra-supportive system that maximises their abilities.

Everyone at Duston seems relaxed, friendly and helpful. I also saw a noticeably clean environment; after the first lesson changeover, I saw just three pieces of litter discarded on the floor, two of which were promptly picked up by teachers.

Most students' parents know how fortunate their children are to attend this massively over-subscribed school. Strickland, you see, is a firm believer in the benefits of making 'marginal gains', seeing every day as a fresh opportunity for everyone to be marginally better than they were the day before – with nobody pushing themselves harder than himself. So thank you, Duston School, for an unforgettable and uplifting day. The invitation is very much open, Ms. Phillipson, to visit a school that's fully deserving of ministerial recognition.



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