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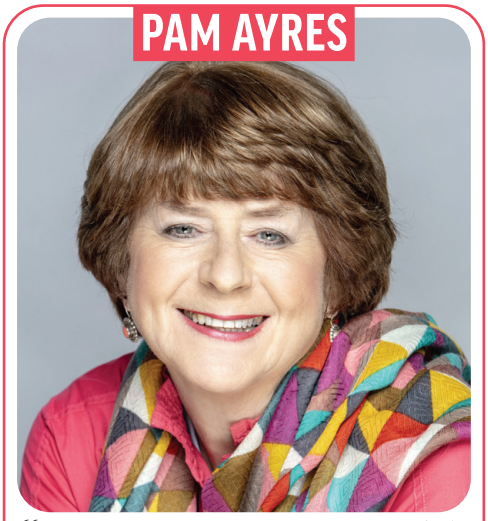

"We were given terribly racist books to read"

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FROM THE EDITOR

"Welcome...

We're going to go out on a limb here and suggest that most of you aren't pining for the days when Education Secretaries would characterise the teaching profession as a 'Blob', and take apparent glee in giving off strong '*My way or the highway*' vibes with every policy announcement.

Nearly two years into Keir Starmer's Labour administration, the relationship between the profession and the government seems nowhere near as adversarial as it once was, though that's not to say there haven't been tensions. At the time of writing, the NEU is balloting its members on potential strike action over teacher pay, school funding and workload concerns, the rollout of Ofsted's report cards could certainly have gone a bit more smoothly, and the DfE's pronouncements on AI have raised a few eyebrows – but on balance, things at least seem a bit more civil than in years gone by.

How long that remains the case will be interesting to see. Thanks to last year's drop of the Curriculum and Assessment Review's final report, we know that there are some big changes on the horizon, but the precise nature of those changes remains somewhat murky. In fairness, we know the process still has a way to go yet, having been told to expect the unveiling of Labour's new schools curriculum in spring 2027 – but a couple of developments in recent weeks may have given some educators pause for thought.

The publication of the government's SEND White Paper seems to have been met with a mix of both cautious optimism and wariness, as Terri Bottriell-Wyse notes over on page 38. Then there's the ambiguity over Labour's long-term intentions for MATs, with the White Paper itself containing talk of "*...moving to all schools being part of school trusts, including new trusts established by local authorities or area partnerships*." Which seems somewhat at odds with previous messaging from this government around the passage of its Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which seemed to suggest that the days of forced academisation were at an end.

Also, lest we forget, all this ongoing policy development and consultation is taking place at a time when the financial pressures bearing down on schools and trusts are steadily ratcheting up (for more on which, see page 45).

One could say of Labour that we should '*Let them cook*', as the young people might put it. But when the leader of the Green Party is getting a standing ovation at an education union conference for saying the kind of things the gathered attendees really want to hear – including a proposal to abolish Ofsted, and a clear-eyed opposition to further academisation – they might want to start being a little clearer as to their true intentions.

Enjoy the issue,

Callum Fauser
callum.fauser@theteachco.com

On board this issue:

Anthony David is an executive headteacher

Nikki Cunningham-Smith is a SENCo and SEND consultant

Neil Parker is an MFL head of department

Terri Bottriell-Wyse is a special school headteacher

Adam Chrostowski is a PE teacher

Kirsty Nunn is a head of computer science

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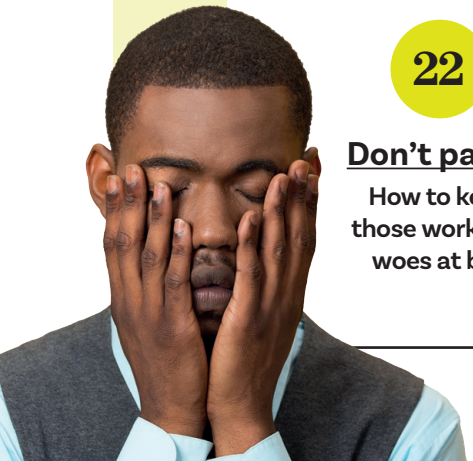

22

Don't panic!
How to keep those workload woes at bay

28

Set and forget?
Why AI marking isn't yet ready for prime time

Stick to the plan
How to talk tactics in PE lessons

60

APR/MAY '26

CONTENTS

Regulars

Features

TS Special – Assessment

TS Focus – Physical Education

Learning Lab

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The newsletter

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

The UNINFORMED teacher's guide to...

LOOKSMAXXING

You know how girls and women have been held to unrealistic and often dangerously unhealthy beauty standards by a cold-eyed, remorseless patriarchy for...ooh, decades at this point? Well, good news everyone – now boys and men get to know what that feels like too!

There's even a zhuzhy name for it – looksmaxxing – which is the practice of 'maximising' your physical attractiveness as much as humanly possible. And if that means injecting experimental treatments into your skin, or using hammers to smash the bones in your face so that they grow back at a specific angle (yes, really), then so much the better. It's certainly good for the livestream clicks. Needless to say, we're talking some pretty extreme stuff here.

DO SAY
"Clav was mid-mog between 2 LOW-TIER NORMIES"

DON'T SAY
"I just wash my face and that's it, really..."

As of right now, the patron saint of looksmaxxing is 20-year-old Clavicular – an online influencer who first came to attention via the streaming platform Kick, sharing and demonstrating assorted looksmaxxing techniques, including the aforementioned bone smashing and (alleged) taking of anabolic steroids.

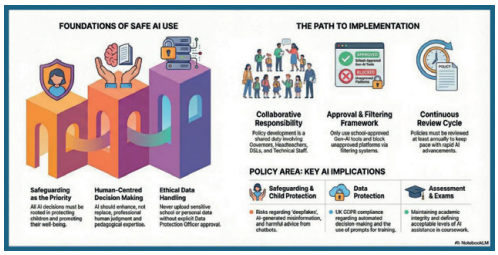
Since then, 'Clav' has essentially been speed-running the internet notoriety circuit – uttering racist slurs in his videos, rubbing shoulders with far-right commentators and influencers, and having run-ins with the law for alleged drug possession and battery. He also went viral in December last year with a video that appeared to show him running over someone in a Tesla Cybertruck. Put simply, if you're hearing 'Clavicular' and 'looksmaxxing' spoken of approvingly in the corridors, you might want to put your '*The kids are talking about Andrew Tate again*' response into motion...

BEAT THE BUDGET

What are we talking about?
The Artificial Intelligence Policy Toolkit for schools by LGfL-The National Grid for Learning

Who is it for?
Senior leaders and designated safeguarding leads

What's on offer?
The contents include a structured framework for establishing or refining your school's AI strategy; a pupil safeguarding question bank; a staff 'Gen-AI survey' for assessing usage rates and confidence levels; and templates to help maintain a register of approved Gen-AI tools



Where is it available?
tinyurl.com/ts153-NL1

WHAT THEY SAID...

"The government's failure to commit to a ban on harmful social media is simply not good enough – families need concrete assurances now."

– *Munira Wilson, education, children and families spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats*

Think of a number...

44%

of school staff agree that their CPD enables them meet the needs of SEND learners
Source: 'Inclusion Index' report (3rd ed.) produced by Global Equity Collective

72%
of physics and religious education teaching in 2024/25 was delivered by non-specialists
Source: 'The Education Workforce in England Summary Report 2026' produced by the National Foundation for Educational Research

49%
of 9,000 state school surveyed by the NEU say that they oppose government plans to introduce AI tutors
Source: NEU

ONE FOR THE WALL

"The trouble with writing fiction is that it has to make sense, whereas real life doesn't"

– Iain Banks

SEND White Paper reactions

In February, the government unveiled a policy paper titled 'Every child achieving and thriving' (see tinyurl.com/ts153-NL2), outlining its plans to improve attendance, close attainment gaps and boost the level of SEND provision available within mainstream schools. Here's how some leading voices within the profession reacted...

"Teachers have many talents, but they cannot overcome a decade of systemic underfunding or growing SEND needs with a bit of extra training."
– Matt Wrack, NASUWT general secretary

"While we welcome the Department's ambition to close the disadvantage attainment gap, there needs to be a concerted focus – with commensurate resources – on supporting disadvantaged pupils if the government is to achieve its goal of reducing the gap by 50%.
– Jude Hillary, co-head of UK policy and practice, NFER

"The planned SEND reforms are certainly necessary and seem sensible, but they constitute a huge ask on mainstream schools to expand existing provision and implement training on a massive scale."
– Pepe Di'Iasio, ASCL general secretary

"These reforms will stand or fall depending on whether the provision for pupils without EHCPs has enough funding to succeed in mainstream schools, and ultimately serves them better than the status quo."
– Nick Harrison, CEO, Sutton Trust

SAVE THE DATE

SPEECHES AND CORRESPONDENCE

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

Zack Polanski addresses NEU annual conference

WHO? Zack Polanski, leader of the Green Party
WHERE? NEU annual conference, Brighton
WHEN? 30th March 2026

"Education in this country has been pushed to the brink by the toxic twin pressures of ideologically-driven reorganisation and an unforgivable squeeze in budgets. And the result? Schools cutting teacher numbers, cutting support staff, cutting GCSE subjects, cutting school trips, extracurricular activities, investment in technology.

Unfortunately, none of this will be news to any of you. And that's shocking. We live in the sixth largest economy in the world, and it's a world that is changing rapidly. We should be moving mountains to make sure every child growing up in this country is as equipped as they possibly can be to navigate these challenges, to make the most of the opportunities, to make their own choices – to not just survive, but thrive.

We are not expanding opportunity in this country. We are shrinking it. And we are shrinking young people's horizons. They're the future. You see it in them. And politicians, we need to see it too.

It is our duty to look at education and see more than budgets and exam results; to see more than numbers on a spreadsheet. It is our duty to see more than just the challenges, to see instead how precious every hour spent in education is for the children in this country – and to make it our mission to realise that potential."

THE RESPONSE:

ASCL calls out FE teacher salary gap

FROM? Claire Green, post-16 and Skills Specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders
REGARDING? New NFER research findings which reveal that further education teachers earn an average of 20% less than their secondary school counterparts
WHEN? 12th March 2026

"Today's research from NFER confirms what college leaders and staff have been experiencing for years: FE teachers are being asked to deliver ever more for significantly less. A 20% pay gap is not only unjust, it is unsustainable.

Despite the professionalism, dedication and expertise of FE staff, continued underfunding means colleges simply cannot offer pay that competes with schools or with industry. This places the sector at a disadvantage, and it is learners who ultimately lose out."

7 MAY 2026 Schools and Academies Show | 10 JUNE - 7 JULY 2026 UK Festival of Play | 2-3 JULY 2026 Festival of Education

2-3 JULY 2026

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

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

7 MAY 2026

Schools and Academies Show
ExCeL London
schoolsandacademiesshow.co.uk

This regular fixture on the education calendar is once again shaping up to be a rewarding day out for school leaders. As well as a substantial CPD programme tailored to the needs of SLTs, there will be opportunities to network with and learn from professional peers, a series of talks detailing best practice and sector trends to watch out for, plus the chance to get up to speed with the very latest education-focused products and services.

10 JUNE TO 7 JULY 2026

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

Organised by trade body Ukie's 'Digital Schoolhouse' outreach initiative and game publisher Electronic Arts, this 'creative computing conference' is aimed at attendees aged 9 to 14, and takes place across five UK locations this summer, giving visitors the chance to meet industry professionals and learn about the tech that drives video game development.

Academy 21
The Online Alternative Provision Experts

Secondary Confident

For many pupils, the move from Year 6 to Year 7 is a significant challenge. The step into a new environment, new expectations and greater independence can affect confidence, engagement and wellbeing during the early stages of secondary school.

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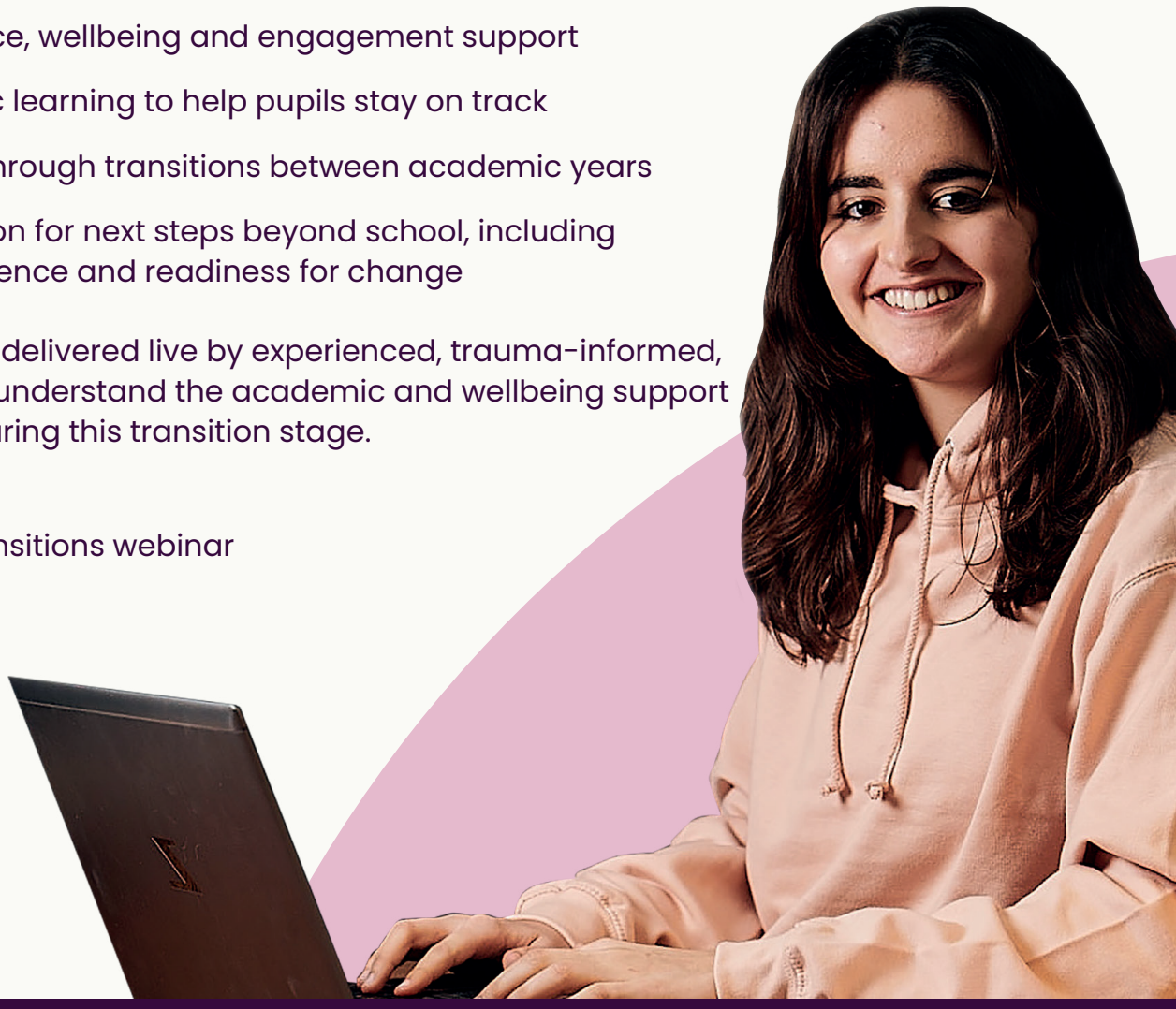
Watch our Transitions webinar



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

Department for Education
Accredited Provision

TEACHER TALES

True stories from the education chalkface

Didn't he do well?

Upon scoring his first goal in his first ever football match for his school, Tommy (not his real name) ran up to me, roaring "*Did I do good, Sir?*" "*You did good,*" I replied, smiling at his evident joy.

At report time I wrote on his report, '*Tommy done good.*' Before the reports went out, the headmaster summoned me to his office, querying my poor use of English in Tommy's PE report, so I told him the story. '*Leave it exactly as it is,*' he instructed.

Later that term, at parent's evening, Tommy's mum and dad took the time to tell me that Tommy was so happy with his report that he'd cried.

Extreme measures

I once received an email which, following a recent Local Authority initiative, was formatted as a 'Student Accident Notification'. It detailed how one of our students had banged their head on a door frame while sailing on a barge, as part of an LA-organised day trip. I'd already been made aware of this (relatively minor) incident shortly after it had happened, so thought little of it.

Reading on, the email gave the date and time of the accident, stated the severity ('minor') and outlined the specific details ('banged head') and primary cause ('falling into a door').

I was, however, surprised and somewhat alarmed to see how the LA had (presumably by mistake) classed the outcome of the accident – '*Body part/action taken: Head/amputation*'.

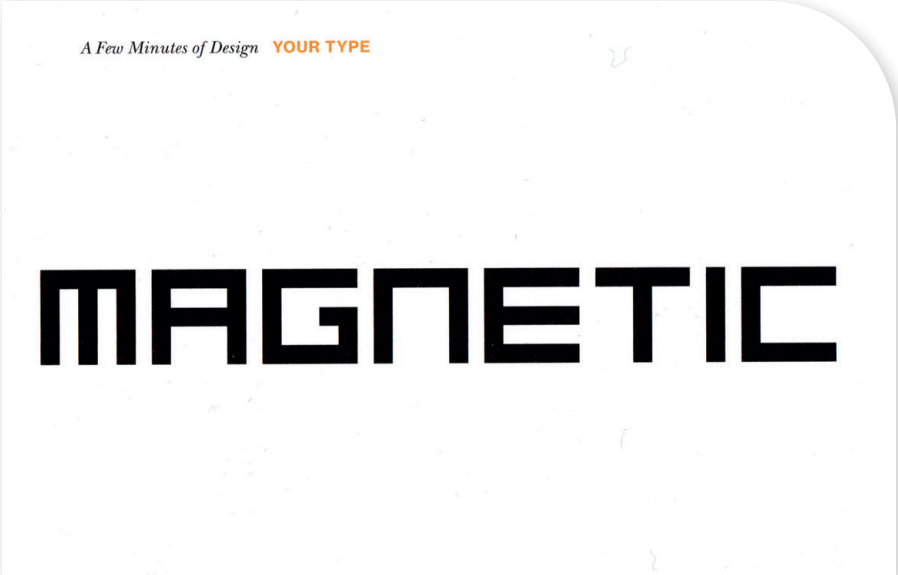
Have a memorable true school tale or anecdote of your own? Share the details, and find more amusing stories, at schoolhumour.co.uk

A FEW MINUTES OF DESIGN

#40 YOUR TYPE

Look carefully at this word. Try to write your name in the same typeface.

Are there clues to any letters that are in your name but not in the sample? Practice drawing the common elements of the letters. What do the angles look like? The line thicknesses? What gives the letters their unique character?



Get Into Film

OKJA

121 MINUTES)

Curriculum Links: *Film studies, biology, PSHE*

In 2007, the Mirando Corporation announces that they have been breeding a special kind of 'super pig'. 26 experimental specimens will be sent to farmers around the world, one of which will be crowned the winner in 10 years' time.

A decade later, a teenage girl named Mija is living on a farm in rural South Korea with her grandfather and their super pig, Okja. Mija and Okja have a very close relationship, but are one day visited by a Mirando spokesperson – zoologist Dr. Johnny Wilcox. He declares Okja winner of the contest, with the result that Okja will be immediately relocated to New York City. Devastated by their imposed separation, Mija follows Okja to Seoul, where she encounters an environmental group, the Animal Liberation Front, who are trying to expose the truth behind Mirando's mistreatment of animals...

Discussion questions:

- Okja could be described as an 'eco-thriller' – what kind of conventions would you expect to see in this sort of film?
- How does Mija's experience of meeting the ALF change her?
- What are Okja's core themes? How does it use genre conventions to explore those themes?

Head online to intofilm.org to stream this film for free and download this film guide, which includes Teacher's Notes for the above discussion points.

Like and subscribe

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

Antonia Bance MP
@antoniabance.bsky.social

I know no parent (and few teachers) who think we should abolish Ofsted. We need to know independent information about how schools are doing - or working class children will pay the price with their education

Patrick Ness
@patricknessbooks.bsky.social

I'm proud to be the writer who made them canonically terrible in Doctor Who. From Class:

Quill: "I'm telling you, he's evil!"

Headmaster: "He's from Ofsted. Of course, he's evil."

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David Voisin is a head of MFL

DICTIONARY DEEP DIVE

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

PARDON MY FRENCH

Haute couture ('high fashion') catwalk shows are high profile events during which models with slender silhouettes (French for 'figure') flaunt designers' latest creations, with price tags (*étiquette* in French) that can be as lavish as said couturiers' levels of creativity. If your pecuniary means are of a more slender nature, however, you could always resort to more affordable *prêt-à-porter* ('ready to wear') clothes instead...

TEACHING TIP: ANAGRAMS

Some people have a natural gift for letters. One such lexical wizard is the writer and broadcaster Stephen Fry. During one memorable speech about his life journey through the land of Lexis before an audience of Oxford University students, Fry recounted his first audience with the great Alec Guinness, during which the anagram 'genuine class' – a fitting description for the legendary Scottish actor – seemingly materialised in his mind there and then.

Anagrams can be a great didactic tool that enable you to wrap important vocabulary work in appealingly ludic and competitive packaging. A lasting testament to the enduring appeal of letter games is the long-running gameshow *Countdown*, of course. The show's 'Queen of the Dictionary Corner', legendary lexicographer Susie Dent, has regularly appeared on the panel for over 33 years.

In the classroom, anagrams are great for giving students the chance to practise their vocabulary. Now, with the aid of modern AI tools, teachers can easily generate endless lists of anagrams while targeting specific words, either in low -stakes quizzes or via more open-ended creative play.

Anagrams ultimately present us with an invitation to play with words – because when you think about it, wordplay lies at the heart of the creative force that animates all great writers.

LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

I can clearly recall my first argument about language. I was 15, and my antagonist was a primary school teacher with whom my father – another teacher – was engaged in conversation. She was arguing that the French language should be radically reformed to alleviate her poor pupils' predicament with the disconcerting unpredictability of the words' orthography. Whether due to my adolescent boldness or some lucky gut feeling, I presciently countered that trying to render any language less idiosyncratic would amount to eviscerating its lexical DNA.

Only years later, having embarked on a more serious study of language, did I come to realise that there was actually some substance to the case I'd been trying to make Spelling 'oddities' sometimes make much more sense once we study them more closely. Take the mute letters in words such as 'sign', 'bomb', 'muscle', 'malign' and 'autumn'. As if automatically, these silent consonants suddenly become pronounced in the related words 'signature', 'bombardment', 'muscular', 'malignant' and 'autumnal'. Such letters are *etymological markers* – not redundant, but in fact useful indicators of words' derivational forms.

For generations, the French institution Academie Française has tried to regulate and control the evolution of the French language – most recently to resist the recent 'intrusion' of anglicised neologisms – yet its futile attempts have been consistently (and gleefully) flouted by French speakers. Not only can languages not be 'reformed', they don't need to be.

SAME ROOT, DIFFERENT WORDS

Rodents use their sharp teeth to gnaw at food.

Wind and waves will e**rod**e cliffs over time

Rust and salty water have cor**rod**ed the wreckage of the *Titanic*

Financial stability

Nikki Cunningham-Smith considers what financial education at KS3 and KS4 should look like in practice – and why it matters...

Gone are the days when teachers could say, '*You won't be able to walk around with a calculator in your pocket*' when students asked why they actually needed to learn mental arithmetic. In 2026, we can assume that pretty much every teenager has instant access to a scientific calculator, courtesy of the smartphones that they do, in fact, carry in their pockets.

Now, more than ever, that question of '*Why are we learning this?*' is still one you can expect to hear often. At the same time, it's not uncommon to see adults ruefully post lists on social media of '*Things I wish school had taught me*'. Combine those together, and we might find ourselves in a position to learn from our own experiences, and ensure that today's students don't experience similar regrets in later life...

An essential life skill

I didn't know what a credit card actually was until someone I met on my university campus sold me on the concept of 'free money', without sharing any knowledge of what 'interest' was or how it worked. I know that many others' early experiences of finance are similar to mine, so it's come as little surprise to see the many calls from educators over the years for a renewed, explicit commitment to financial education in schools.

The latest push for improved financial education comes in the wake of the government's Curriculum and Assessment Review, the final report of which states that "*Financial education should not be delayed until later life*." (see tinyurl.com/ts153-FE1). While welcomed by many, this poses an important question for schools – what should a meaningful financial education actually look like in practice, particularly at KS3 and KS4?

For too long, financial education has sat on the margins of the curriculum. Often absorbed into PSHE days, delivered through one-off sessions or squeezed into the gaps between 'core' subjects, it's rarely been treated as the essential life skill that it actually is.

> **"For too long, financial education has sat on the margins"**

At the same time, a growing number of young people are now navigating an ever more complex financial landscape filled with digital banking, online scams, various 'buy-now-pay-later' schemes, rising living costs and uncertain employment prospects. In this context, a more coherent and carefully sequenced approach isn't just desirable, but urgently needed.

Building on the foundations

That said, we don't need to start from scratch. Most pupils arrive in secondary school with some foundational understanding of money developed during primary education. The challenge at KS3/4 is to build on this learning in ways that are age-appropriate, relevant and rooted in real life situations.

At primary, pupils will typically develop a basic, but important understanding of money. They'll learn to recognise different coins and notes, understand value, and use money in simple problem-solving contexts. Through maths and PSHE teaching, they'll be introduced to ideas such as saving, spending, budgeting and the difference between needs and wants – learning that's necessarily concrete, and closely tied to everyday experiences.

By the time they reach secondary school, however, pupils' perceptions of the financial world will begin to expand rapidly. They may now have access to their own online accounts, manage their own spending or encounter some forms of financial decision-making via certain family circumstances.

As a business studies teacher, I know that the subject can play a useful role within a new financial curriculum, but it's rarely available as an option prior to KS4. A coherent KS3-4 financial education curriculum should therefore shift away from abstract concepts and towards more applied understanding, in a way that helps students make sense of the systems and choices they'll soon be encountering independently.

Everyday money management

An effective financial education scheme of work at KS3/KS4 would be carefully sequenced, revisited over time and embedded within the wider curriculum, rather than treated as an add-on.

One useful way to think about this is to envisage three overlapping strands. The first strand is 'everyday money management', which would include practical knowledge of areas such as budgeting, understanding payslips and tax, managing bank accounts, and how to interpret bills, rent agreements and contracts.

Pupils should be able to explore how money moves in and out of households, what fixed and variable costs look like, and how financial decisions affect day-to-day life. These are not abstract skills, but the realities that pupils will face within a few short years.

Understanding risk

The second strand would focus on risk and decision-making. As pupils grow older, they'll need to be able understand credit, loans, overdrafts and the long-term consequences of debt. This is also where discussions about gambling mechanics, online spending, scams and fraud will belong.

Importantly, this strand should be taught *without judgement*. Young will people benefit far more from developing an understanding of how such financial systems really work and the specific reasons as to why they can be so risky, rather than simply being told to avoid them altogether.

The third strand would then look ahead to future planning and financial wellbeing. Areas covered here could include learning about different post-16 and post-18 pathways, the mechanics of student finance, what apprenticeships are, and the nature of earnings, pensions and long-term saving. These topics can feel distant to younger pupils, but introducing them early on will help to demystify some important parts of what being an adult involves, and hopefully lead to them making more informed decisions when the time comes.

Across all three strands, the emphasis should be on progression and revisiting ideas at increasing levels of complexity, rather than treating each area as a one-off topic.

Rooted in realism

How financial education is taught matters just as much as *what* is taught. Worksheets and abstract explanations alone are unlikely to equip pupils with the confidence they need, which is why an effective financial education provision will be one rooted in realism.

Case studies, simulations, scenario-based learning – these let pupils explore consequences in a safe environment. Analysing mock payslips, planning a budget for independent living or comparing different mobile phone contracts will make the learning much more tangible.

There are also some clear opportunities for effective cross-curricular links. Maths lessons can obviously be a good venue for reinforcing knowledge of how to approach financial calculations. Citizenship and PSHE lessons can provide opportunities for exploring the ethical and social dimensions of earning and spending. Careers education can in turn connect what students learn to real-world pathways.

When financial education is shared across subjects, it starts to feel purposeful, rather than peripheral.

A sense of agency

Just as importantly, pupils need space to talk. People's financial attitudes tend to be shaped by their subjective experience, culture and family circumstances. Creating classrooms in which pupils can discuss money openly, without shame or assumptions, is therefore essential.

At its best, financial education ends up teaching pupils about far more than just money. It can also impart important lessons about confidence, independence and agency. Pupils who understand how financial systems work will be less vulnerable to exploitation, better equipped to navigate adulthood, and better prepared to make choices that support their long-term wellbeing.

There's also an equity dimension. Not all pupils will learn these skills at home, giving schools a vital role to play in levelling the playing field. A coherent national approach – one that's properly resourced and thoughtfully delivered – has the potential to make a lasting difference.

The renewed focus on financial education in the Curriculum and Assessment Review offers a timely opportunity to build upon what schools are doing already and add a few significant improvements. Whether those efforts are ultimately successful will largely depend on whether schools are given the time, training and curriculum space to do it well.

Financial education deserves to be treated not as an optional extra, but as a core entitlement. One that prepares young people not just for exams, but for life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nikki Cunningham-Smith is a SENCo and SEND/behaviour consultant at Cee Es Education; for more information, visit cee-eseducation.com or follow @cee_es_education (Insta)

YPO

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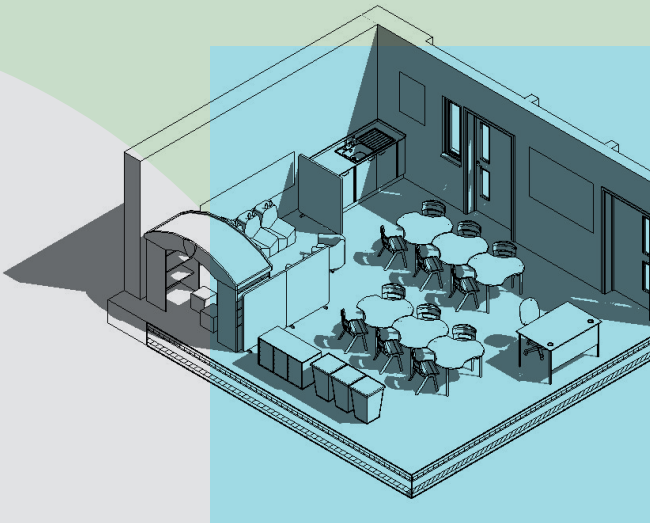

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REASONS TO USE...

5 Experience AI

If you're a teacher unsure of how to go about teaching AI, help is now at hand...

30 SECOND BRIEFING

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1 NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED

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Developed by the Raspberry Pi Foundation and Google DeepMind, the sessions are hands-on, practical and designed to build your confidence, no matter your starting point.

2 READY-TO-USE RESOURCES

The training supports the use of the Experience AI programme – free, curriculum-linked lessons designed for pupils aged 11–14. The lesson resources include slides, videos, interactive activities and assessments that make AI engaging and accessible for young people. 98% of the teachers we've trained said the course improved their understanding of AI, with 94% finding it of a high quality and useful to them. The resources are designed to be used straight away, with the training ensuring that you're ready to deliver with confidence.

3 EVENTS THAT WORK AROUND YOU

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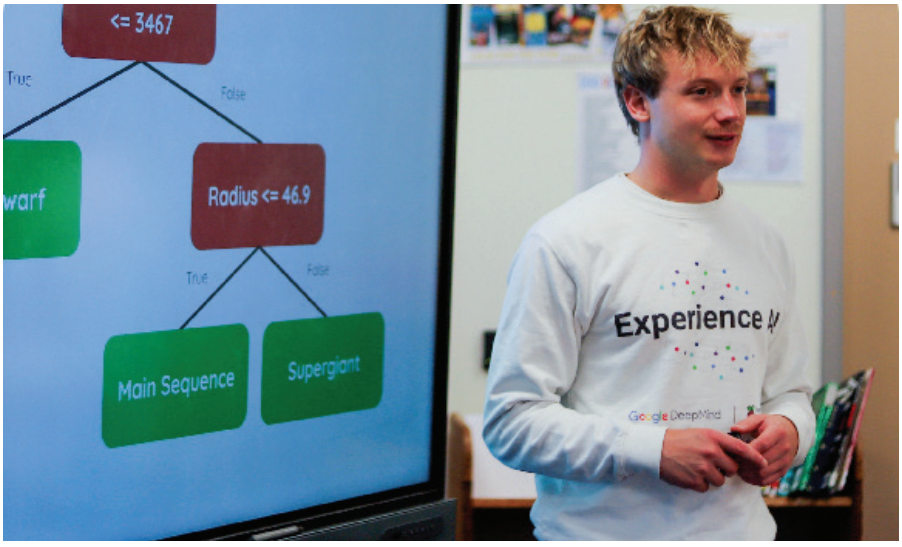
Whichever format you choose, you'll get the same high-quality experience, the same ready-to-teach resources and the chance to grow your AI confidence alongside other practitioners.



Experience AI | Google DeepMind | Raspberry Pi Foundation | parentzone

Contact: Parent Zone supports secondary school educators with free teaching resources and training to improve outcomes for young people in the digital age. **programmes@parentzone.org.uk | parentzone.org.uk**

4 SUPPORTIVE, TEACHER-FOCUSED ENVIRONMENTS

Whether you're brand new to AI, or just need a boost of confidence, our supportive training approach makes complex topics clear and approachable. You'll take part in hands-on activities, ask questions freely and leave with the knowledge and tools to immediately apply what you've learnt in the classroom. Plus, you'll be joining a community of educators all exploring the same challenges and opportunities presented by AI.

5 UNDERSTANDING THE DIGITAL FUTURE

AI is already shaping the world around us, as more and more students encounter it every day. Our training lets educators take the lead in preparing young people for a future in which to be 'digitally literate' will entail understanding algorithms, data biases and machine learning. Our sessions will equip you to guide meaningful, informed discussions in the classroom, and help students become not just consumers of AI, but critical thinkers and responsible digital citizens.

Key Points

Become an Experience AI educator, connect with peers, share best practice and build your confidence in teaching AI by signing up for free training at parentzone.org.uk/ExperienceAI

The training is perfect for non-specialist secondary teachers of any subject, spanning step-by-step guidance, accessible content and practical support

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Labour's successful scrapping of the VAT exemption on private school fees suggests they're serious about closing the gap between the educational haves and have-nots – but there's still work to be done...

Melissa Benn

One of the most hard fought, if low-key political battles during the first year of Keir Starmer's government came over Labour's decision to scrap the VAT exemption on private school fees and business rates.

There were two distinctive features of this conflict that still stand out – the first being Labour's determination to see the measure through. Unlike a number of its other proposals, there have been no U-turns on this particular policy, with the relevant legislation having been passed in early 2025 (see tinyurl.com/ts153-MB1). Labour's consistency was, in part, down to the dogged resolve to improve state education shown by many key Labour figures, including Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson and Chancellor Rachel Reeves.

Extraordinary fightback

The second notable feature of the VAT debate was the quite extraordinary fightback mounted by the independent school lobby, which never let up from the moment the idea was first mooted to the legislation that made it official.

Barely a week passed without a newspaper story or broadcast item that castigated Labour's 'class war', or featured a family that bemoaned the 'cruel' measure. One 'special report' commissioned by the sector predicted a significant exodus of families to state education (see tinyurl.com/ts153-MB2). To date, there has been no such exodus.

For the independent school sector, then, this was a major defeat – but it's worth thinking about some for the reasons for it. The measure was certainly congruent with Labour values, but it was also clear that the policy was popular with the public, many of whom see costly private education as an example of the kind of 'opportunity hoarding' that damages the chances of the majority (see tinyurl.com/ts153-MB3).

Conversion and repurposing

What next, then, for a government seemingly so committed to improving state education? One potential answer might lie in an interesting report published this spring by the Private Education Policy Forum (full disclosure – I'm a founding member). In contrast to the outright hostility that's often characterised discussion of the issue, the PEPF's 'State Expectations' report – an investigation into the history and experiences of fee-paying independent schools converting into state schools – takes an entirely different tack.

It's intended as the first in a series of forthcoming reports by the PEPF, which will set out different options for systemic level change under the banner, 'Levelling the Playing Field'.

'State Expectations' looks in detail at how 27 private schools went about entering the state sector from the early 2000s onwards, either by converting to academies or by being repurposed as free schools.

The report highlights every aspect of what remains an unusual journey for such schools to take – from the reasons why these schools chose to embark on it (falling pupil numbers, existing financial issues or, in some cases, a desire to return to 'founding values') to the difficulties some private schools have faced over the course of the process, and the impact on the surrounding educational landscape.

A more representative sample

On balance, the report finds that such conversions have largely been positive, with private schools previously used to greater freedoms in everything from admissions to curriculum gradually adjusting successfully to the accountability demands found within the state sector.

Perhaps the most significant finding in the report is a graph charting the dramatic rise in pupils claiming Free School Meals and those recognised as having SEND after these former private schools converted – through the figures remain slightly lower than those of surrounding state schools.

This is often because, as academies and free schools, these converted schools were able to benefit from some admission freedoms, such as selection by aptitude and 'fair banding', allowing them to cultivate a more favourable pupil profile than neighbouring state schools with more inclusive admissions policies – something with the potential to become stumbling block in future.

When all is said and done, however, it would appear that conversion can boost local provision while also enabling a much more representative sample of pupils to enjoy the benefits of attractive buildings, generous space and often a distinct residual 'ethos' associated with the previous institution.

I hope that the Labour government will consider this report seriously, and feels inspired to devise other ways of strengthening the process whereby private schools can be brought into the state family. If we're serious about eradicating the historic and unjust gap that exists between private and state education, then conversion may well be prove to be an effective tool.

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

AI's enabling of plagiarism may have dominated the headlines, but we should be just as wary – if not more so – of the how the technology has become an inferior substitute for personal relationships and emotional connections among teens...

Natasha Devon

As I type, I've just returned from an education conference in Prague. While there I met middle-school teachers from all over Europe, and time and again had conversations with them about AI, and chatbots like ChatGPT in particular.

In contrast to the many public conversations centred on how easy the technology makes it for children to cheat on their homework, the main concern I heard was that pupils were developing an emotional attachment to chatbots, along with a sense that neurodivergent young people were particularly vulnerable to this.

Playing catch-up

These fears aren't without foundation. Research by the Youth Empowerment Fund has shown that one in four teenagers are using AI chatbots for mental health advice and support. Meanwhile, a poll commissioned by Vodafone found that 31% of young users describe chatbots as a 'friend'.

The general feeling among the teachers I spoke to be seemed to be that they needed to understand the technology better – '*I should know everything about the platforms they are using so I can talk to them about it*' – often expressed with furrowed brows, seemingly weary at the prospect.

I'm used to hearing similar sentiments from educators about social media. The trouble is, by the time we adults have first heard about a popular online craze, young people will have already moved on (see 6 7, Andrew Tate). Trying to familiarise ourselves with such content inevitably becomes an exhausting game of catch-up. From the pupils' perspectives, we're embarrassingly behind the curve.

When talking to teenagers about social media, I therefore try to focus on the critical thinking and scientific literacy skills they need to navigate any online platform and decipher any forms of content. My hope is that by focusing on the general and universal like this, I can avoid the likelihood of conversations seeming irrelevant.

Love and connection

That's why I believe that teachers' attempts at trying to wrap their heads around everything a child could possibly use an AI chatbot for might not be the best use of their limited time. Rather, I think educators should concentrate on showing children what *genuine connection feels like*.

Neuroscientists have discovered that when we have a really good conversation with another human being, the brain's dopamine levels become optimised. That's because around 93% of dopamine secretion is controlled by the limbic system – our 'emotional brain'.

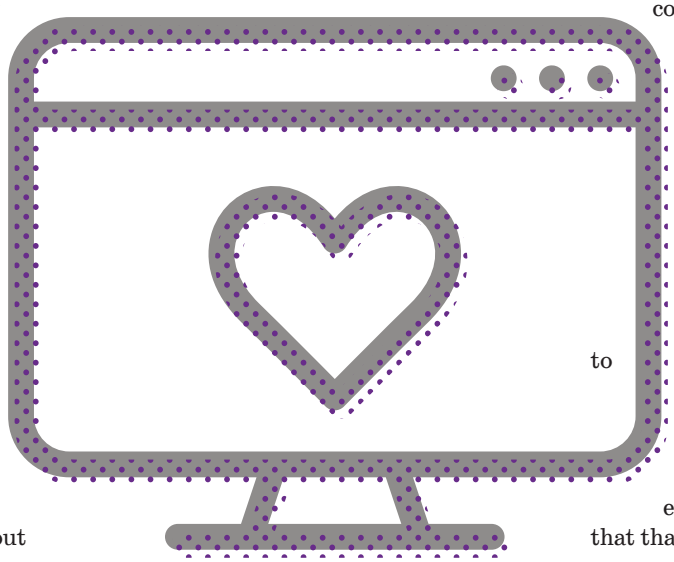
It appears that there's some scientific truth to the idea that head and heart are inextricably linked. Feeling loved improves our brain chemistry, which in turn helps us to think more clearly, reflect, and ultimately come to arrive at better decisions.

Dopamine spikes

Applying this to the relationship between pupil and teacher, 'love' and 'connection' might mean showing interest in a young person and listening to what they have to say, without judgement. It would involve asking lots of open questions: '*What was happening when you first started to feel this way?*'; '*Can you tell me what that feels like?*' or my personal favourite, '*What would you like to happen next?*'

Teachers often lament that they lack the resources or expertise to 'fix' pupils' mental health struggles, but just having this type of dialogue can do something tangible and measurable to pupils' brain chemistry.

It also teaches young people what genuine connection feels like. AI chatbots are designed to be sycophantic, rather than empathetic. We might experience a fleeting dopamine spike from being told by a robot that we're clever or right, but it's more akin to the slight frisson we feel when receiving a 'like' on social media than the human connection we need to thrive.



The difference is subtle, but once you've experienced both it becomes obvious. By the same token, after you've heard what really good live music sounds like, you'll likely appreciate the pale imitation that is AI-generated music far less.

Teachers don't generally enter the profession to become technology experts. They do so to make a difference in the lives of young people by serving as role models. As pupils continue to engage in an ever-more online-oriented existence, there's more value in that than ever.

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

CLASSROOM LIFE

Crafting a culture

Callum Fauser looks at how the leadership of William de Ferrers School in Essex has gone about tackling those all-too-common issues of student behaviour and staff retention...

James Donaldson, Executive Headteacher

"*Excellent relationships, excellent behaviour and excellent attitudes to learning and behaviour are what produce the environments in which teachers and students can excel.*"

Without wanting to sound disparaging, most secondary schools exist as islands. Even in the densest parts of inner city London, they'll usually be clearly set apart from their immediate neighbours behind a high fence or situated well away from the nearest road, leaving visitors in no doubt as to where the school's boundaries begin and end.

William de Ferrers School isn't like that. Originally opened during the early 80s in South Woodham Ferrers – a small Essex town roughly equidistant between Chelmsford and Southend – its buildings originally formed part of a unique social space shared with the rest of the town. The school's classrooms and staff areas were originally under the same roof the town's library, local community facilities and even a licensed bar.

Things have changed a bit since then. The bar is long gone, and the library now has its own discrete premises, but William de Ferrers School remains uniquely enmeshed within the town. A leisure centre sits directly next door, and the entrance to reception opens out onto the pavement, with a line of local takeaways and restaurants visible on the other side of the road. An island it is not – though the electronic sign-in systems and security doors necessary to satisfy modern safeguarding requirements are all present, as you'd expect.

Fortuitous timing

As with many other secondaries since 2010, those changes have also included academisation. In 2024, the school became part of The Chelmsford Learning Partnership (CLP) – a

move that saw the arrival of executive headteacher, James Donaldson, who had previously overseen the opening of The Beaulieu Park School, Essex's first all-through school in nearby Chelmsford.

As Donaldson tells it, "*CLP's due diligence highlighted some areas where the school could benefit from additional support and investment, particularly around behaviour systems and overall consistency. These were not unusual challenges, and it was clear that the school had strong foundations on which we could build.*

"*Once my September 2024 start date was confirmed, I considered how best to begin the year. I weighed up establishing a set of clear routines early or spending longer observing before making changes. In the end, introducing a few well-chosen expectations from the outset felt like the right balance — giving everyone clarity, while still allowing time to understand the school more deeply.*"

Donaldson ultimately opted to make a number of early strategic changes aimed at setting the right tone and clearly communicating the leadership's intentions to the rest of the school. That decision turned out to be well-judged when the school was notified of an Ofsted inspection during the third week of September. For a new leader, such timing can be challenging, but in this instance it also proved beneficial. "*In many ways, the timing was fortuitous,*" Donaldson reflects. "*Ofsted heard some longstanding, historic concerns, but the overall parent and staff feedback was extremely positive, which reinforced the direction we were taking.*"

Ofsted's inspection report ultimately rated the school Good across all areas, barring a 'Requires Improvement' for quality of education. With the outcome of the inspection serving as a mandate of sorts, Donaldson and his colleagues set about tackling those issues.

Odd architecture

"*One of our early steps was to bring behaviour systems together, so that expectations were consistent for everyone,*" Donaldson notes. "*Centralising detentions meant pastoral and senior staff could support students effectively and helped reduce unnecessary workload for teachers.*"

At the same time, the school also introduced same-day detentions. "*They're not especially long, but it means there's now an immediate consequence in place,*" Donaldson

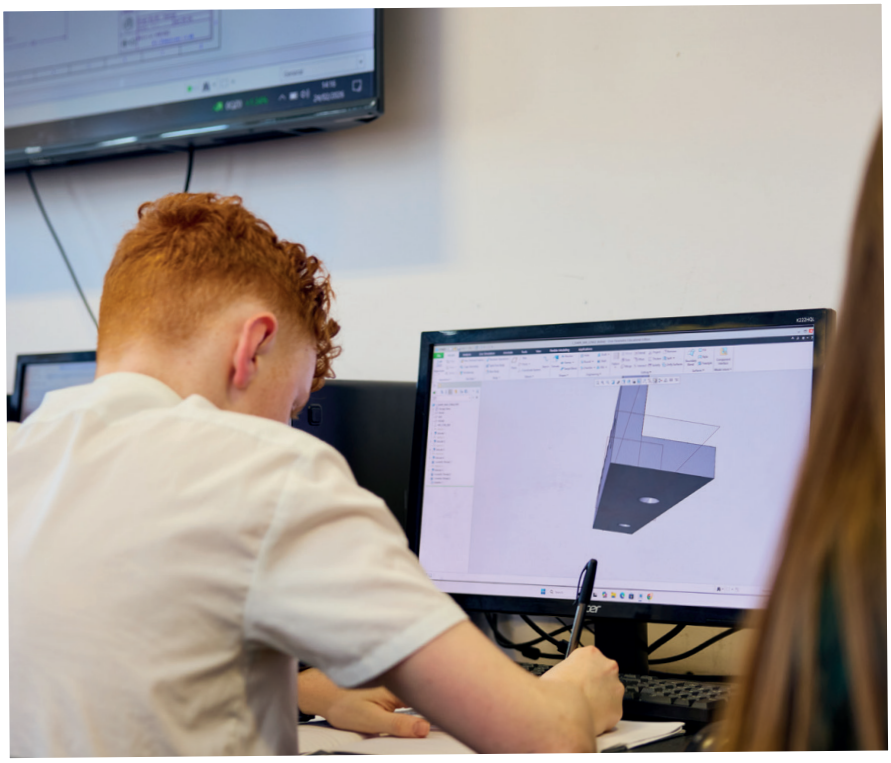
'ARRK' VALUES

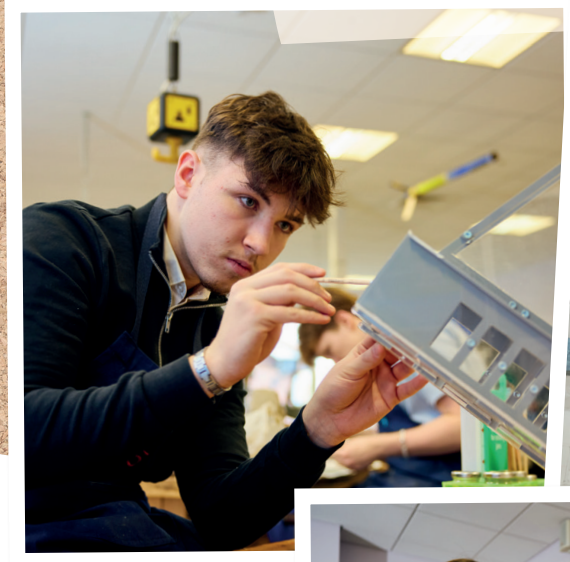
"*As you walk around the school, you'll see our 'ARRK values' displayed on the walls:*

- ***A**spiration*
- ***R**espect*
- ***R**esponsibility*
- ***K**indness.*

The school's rewards system is now built around those values, whether it be our end of term rewards or the cards our children carry around with them as a form of positive personal reward. They're not values that are attached to ability – we can all aspire, we can all be kind. They're about how we try to operate alongside each other, at whatever level."

– James Donaldson, Executive Headteacher





explains. "*Form tutors are notified when they need to bring a child down at the end of the day, because we want to draw on those existing relationships* – 'Johnny, you have a detention, down we go' – *so that we can get things quickly done and dusted.*"

Another consideration concerned the school's architecture. As Donaldson explains, "*The school's original 1980s multi-use design created some supervision challenges that wouldn't meet modern safeguarding expectations, Certain areas were tucked away or difficult to monitor, which meant we needed to rethink how some spaces were used.*"

"*Students had fed back for a long time that some of the older toilet areas didn't feel welcoming or well-located. As part of modernising the building, we invested in a new, centrally located toilet block that is brighter, safer and much more in line with what students expect today.*"

Growing reputation

Another key priority at William de Ferrers has been teacher retention. "*Exit surveys before academisation reflected a mixture of reasons for staff decisions to move on, including suggestions that behaviour systems could be strengthened,*" Donaldson recalls. "*One year on, staff retention is extremely strong, with only one colleague leaving for a well-deserved promotion.*"

What would Donaldson cite as being the main factors behind that positive shift? "*Our reputation is improving, to the point that staff are wanting to stay and new staff are wanting to join us. Applicants know what we can offer them from being part of a supportive MAT – trust-wide professional development expertise, as well as a health package that includes online GP appointments, which colleagues really value. Our current direction of travel, our values* [see panel]*, our growing student values – it all seems to have worked.*"

When visiting a school like this, I'm always looking out for those unique qualities – the things that a school does or can offer that set it apart. Our tour of the school grounds briefly stops off at both a full-size climbing wall and a well-equipped multigym, complete with sophisticated-looking treadmills, rowing machines, exercise bikes and full complement of weight-training equipment, both playing host to a lively class of Y8s.

So what would Donaldson consider to be the school's most distinct characteristics? "*In my experience, when behaviour and relationships are strong, teachers and students can thrive. That's why our early focus was on strengthening culture and routines so that the best possible conditions for learning were in place. We're now building on that foundation to continue improving teaching and learning across the school.*"

SUBJECT CLOSE-UP – D&T

Baz Dimopoulos is head of the school's D&T faculty

"I work alongside colleagues who have prior knowledge and experience of 3D modelling, high-end construction, graphic design, catering and AI. We work as a team, using each other's specialisms to design a curriculum that offers a wide variety of skills for the students, and the school supports us with budgets.

Having D&T staff with backgrounds in engineering, 3D modelling, construction and product design has helped the department advance in terms of what we can now teach. You can see the results in students' practical skills and familiarity with processes like laser cutting and 3D printing.

We design projects that our students will want to make, and which combine elements of both modern technology and traditional skills. We're still taking students through the processes of marking out, cutting, drilling by hand and those sorts of things, but then combining those with computer-aided design, 3D printing, laser cutting and other technologies.

What's changed recently is that many students have previously played games like Minecraft *to express their creativity, which has helped develop their visualisation skills when engaged in 3D modelling activities. The standard of models and level of detail we now see being produced at younger ages is fantastic.*

The bottom line for me is that I want students to get into industries they aspire to join, attend their preferred university, and/or secure the apprenticeship they want at the end of KS5. The technology is evolving so quickly, but with the team we have, we all feel excited to adapt with it."

From overwhelmed TO ORGANISED

Kirsty Nunn presents 10 time management tips for any struggling ECTs who might be wondering what kind of job they've got themselves into...

Your first few years in teaching have a peculiar flavour. It tastes a bit like adrenaline and a little bit like panic.

One minute you're planning an inspiring lesson on computational thinking or Shakespearean tragedy, the next you're staring at 63 unread emails, three class sets of books to mark, a safeguarding form you meant to complete and a meeting that started 5 minutes ago.

Everything matters, everything feels urgent, and without a plan, the job will expand to fill every waking hour. But having a workable structure can make all the difference between feeling constantly reactive and feeling in control.

1. You can't do everything to perfection

Time management in teaching isn't about squeezing more into your day; it's about designing your day so it works for you, rather than against you.

There's always more that you could tweak, differentiate, redesign or mark. If you try to perfect every worksheet and annotate every margin comment with forensic detail, you'll burn out before half term.

Instead, define what 'good enough' looks like. That means deciding in advance roughly how long a task should take and sticking to it. Set a timer if it helps. When it rings, simply move on. Parkinson's Law tells us that work expands to fill the time available. Shrink the container, and the work will tighten accordingly.

2. Batch your work

New teachers will often jump reactively from task to task. A behaviour log here, an email there, a quick resource tweak, then half a marking session before being interrupted again. Context-switching is cognitively expensive though, with each switch burning mental fuel.

Instead, group similar tasks together. By answering emails only once or twice a day, marking in one focused block or planning several lessons in one sitting, your brain will settle into a rhythm and work faster, since it's not constantly rebooting.

3. Plan your week before it starts

Sunday night dread usually comes from uncertainty. You know that there's 'a lot' you need to do, but it all sits within a vague fog – so spend 20 minutes or so mapping out your week ahead. Clarity reduces anxiety.

Make a note of any meetings, impending deadlines or lessons that will need extra preparation and likely marking points. The goal isn't to fill every hour but to prevent any nasty surprises. Those teachers who appear calm are rarely doing less, but they are being proactive. They're not just remembering tasks at the last minute, but rather pre-empting any potential sticking points during the week ahead.

> *"Your email inbox is a tool – not a command centre for your stress levels"*

4. Build repeatable systems

The most efficient teachers are systems thinkers. They'll reuse slide templates, create feedback banks, use seating plans strategically and develop starter routines that require minimal preparation.

Not only does this save time, it also creates consistency for students. You don't get extra points for reinventing the wheel every Tuesday, so see if there are any shared resources in the department that you can adapt. If not, and if you teach multiple classes, design core lesson frameworks that you can tweak quickly. A standard structure – such as retrieval starter, followed by modelled example, guided practice, independent task and exit ticket – creates a predictable rhythm. Once that rhythm is embedded, planning then becomes a matter of refinement, rather than invention.

5. Protect your cognitive 'prime time'

Just because someone else is in the staffroom marking at 7am, that doesn't mean you should too. Everyone has a period during the day when their thinking is at its sharpest. For some, it'll be in the early morning before school even starts. For others, it might be immediately after the final bell rings.

Identify yours and use it for those tasks that require the most thinking – planning complex lessons, analysing misconceptions or designing assessments. Administrative jobs can then live in your 'lower energy' slots.

Similarly, give yourself proper space for more emotionally demanding tasks, such as responding to parental concerns or making phone calls home. These deserve proper attention, rather than rushed replies between other jobs.

6. Rethink your marking habits

Marking can quietly colonise your evenings if

you let it. The key question to ask is not '*Have I marked everything?*' but '*Has my feedback changed students' thinking?*'

Whole class feedback sheets can be more efficient than writing the same comment 28 times. Live marking during independent work can reduce after-school load. Self- and peer assessment, when modelled carefully, can build student responsibility and save you hours.

Mark with a purpose, not a highlighter addiction. Decide what you're looking for and focus on that.

7. Manage your email before it manages you

Decide when to check your email. Turn off your inbox notifications, and don't enable access on your personal devices.

Most emails don't require an immediate response. If something truly urgent arises, someone will usually find you. Create 'quick response' templates for common queries that you can quickly copy and edit, and use folders with automated rules so that you don't have to trawl through dozens of automated MIS notifications.

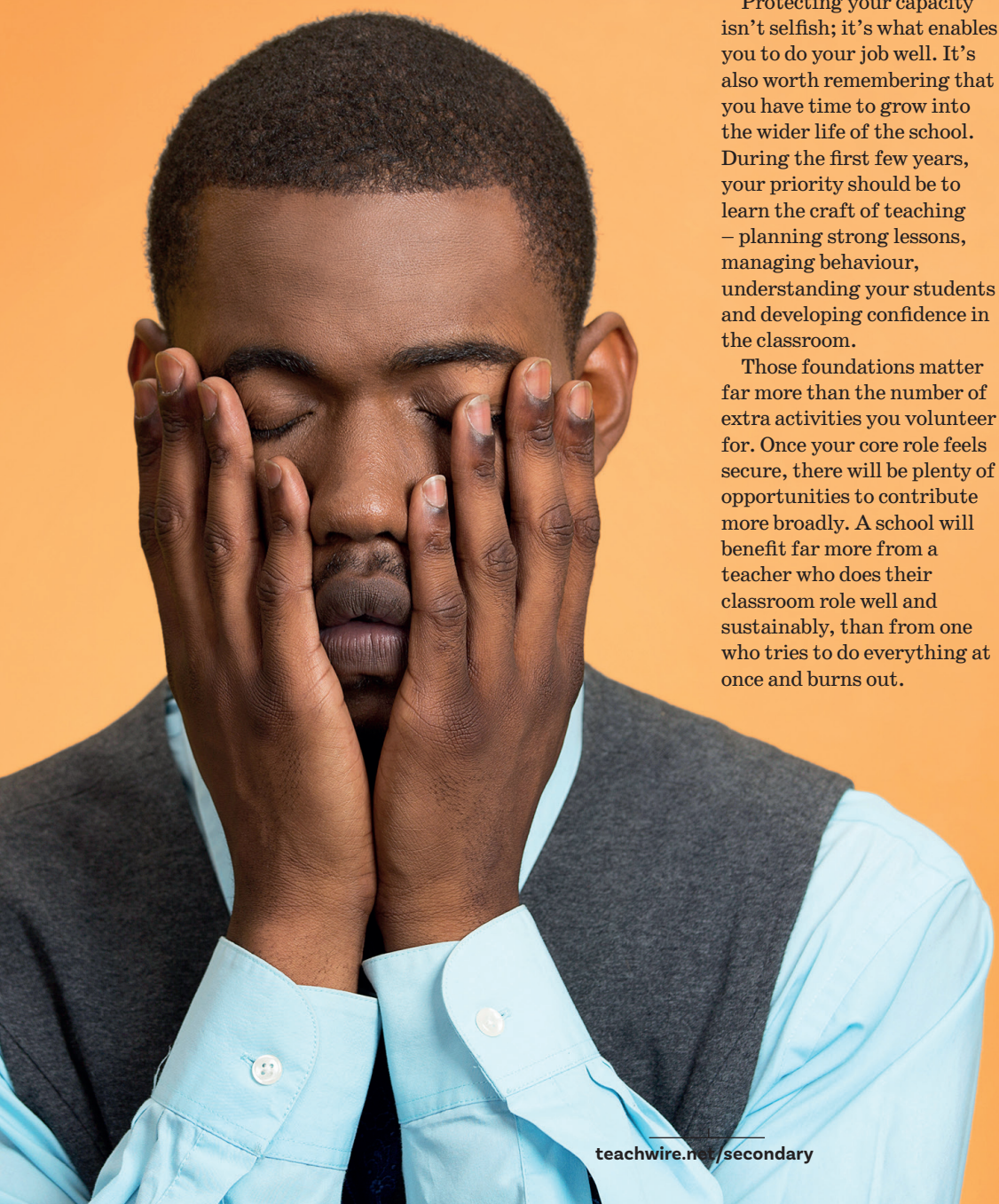
Treat your email as a scheduled task, rather than as a constant background activity that risks pulling your attention away from more important work. Your email inbox is a tool – not a command centre for your stress levels.

8. Say 'no' with professionalism

In your early career, there can be the temptation to prove yourself by accepting everything – invitations to various clubs and committees, interventions, assorted last-minute requests. Before agreeing to something new, though, ask yourself what you'll need to remove to make space for it. If the answer is 'sleep', then reconsider.

Protecting your capacity isn't selfish; it's what enables you to do your job well. It's also worth remembering that you have time to grow into the wider life of the school. During the first few years, your priority should be to learn the craft of teaching – planning strong lessons, managing behaviour, understanding your students and developing confidence in the classroom.

Those foundations matter far more than the number of extra activities you volunteer for. Once your core role feels secure, there will be plenty of opportunities to contribute more broadly. A school will benefit far more from a teacher who does their classroom role well and sustainably, than from one who tries to do everything at once and burns out.



9. Plan for behaviour, not just content

One of the biggest hidden drains on a teacher's time is low-level disruption. Not dramatic incidents, but the constant drip of interruptions, talking during instructions, slow starts to tasks, repeated reminders about equipment or the need to regain attention.

Every interruption forces you to stop, reset and explain again, and across a full day of lessons those minutes will accumulate quickly. When students know exactly what happens upon them entering the room, how to respond when instructions are given and what to do when they finish a task, lessons can move forward without constant stop-starting.

It might feel as though set teaching routines slow things down at first, but it's an investment that will pay back every lesson. Over the course of a year, those reclaimed minutes will turn into hours of learning time.

10. Schedule recovery as you'd schedule work

Teaching is emotionally demanding. If your calendar shows a wall of obligations, you'll always feel that you're permanently behind.

So try building small recovery rituals into your week – such as a walk after school, a protected evening with no schoolwork or a weekend cut-off time. You're not a machine optimised for output, but a human being with fluctuating energy levels. Setting aside specific times for recharging will let you return to the classroom with clearer thinking and greater patience.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kirsty Nunn is head of computer science at Millfield School, as well as a speaker, researcher and award-winning educator

BAKED-IN *benefits*

Abigail Hawkins on why schools should be wary of storing up issues tomorrow by economising too much on their edtech spend today...

I baked a loaf of bread recently. Or rather, I attempted to.

A quick trip to the supermarket seemed like the obvious starting point. Flour, yeast, a few other bits. Nothing extravagant. Yet by the time I'd picked up the cheapest ingredients on the shelf, I'd already spent more than the price of the supermarket's own brand luxury loaf.

The calculations don't stop there, of course. A bag of flour might produce several loaves, and the yeast will certainly stretch further. Equipment comes into the equation as well. In this particular scenario, I'm generously assuming that I already own a baking tray, and am therefore not including that in the cost. The oven still needs to run for a couple of hours, however. After all, energy isn't free.

Then there's the small matter of actually knowing how to make the bread. I'm no expert baker, but I'm aware that producing something edible relies on having at least a little knowledge, a bit of practice and a willingness to accept that the first couple of attempts may not look quite like the glossy photograph on the recipe page.

At some point during all this, a thought starts to form – *someone else has already done all of this work*. They've bought ingredients in bulk, developed the recipe, refined the process, invested in the equipment and produced a loaf that's ready to eat. Suddenly, that supermarket bread starts to look like a remarkably efficient solution. So it's with that mind that I abandon my baking ambitions and opt to instead buy a pre-made loaf...

Invisible processes

This small domestic experience often comes to mind whenever I hear conversations about the 'costs' of edtech. That's because very often, such discussions focus solely on the finished product sitting on the shelf, while treating everything that went into actually producing it as largely invisible.

> **"The visible tool will often represent the smallest part of the overall cost"**

What often frustrates me during these kinds of conversations are the expectations that educational tools should be cheap, or even free. Questions will often be framed around finding '*something similar, but cheaper*,' sometimes reflecting a misunderstanding of what it is that schools are actually purchasing.

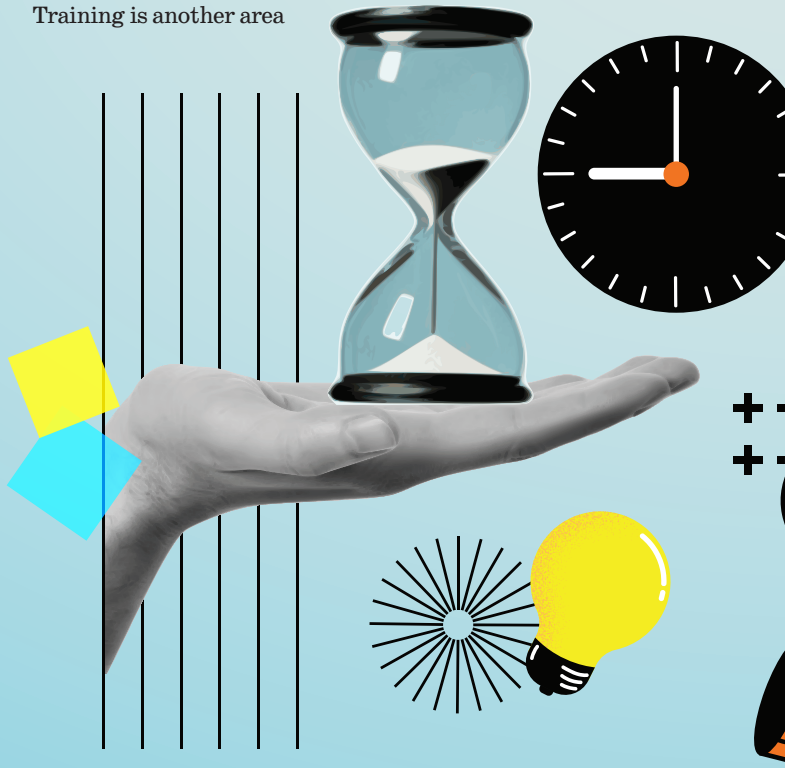
It's understandable that many people will look only at the finished product in front of them – a little like seeing that ready-made loaf sat in the bakery window. The loaf exists and looks ready to consume, so it's easy to assume that its cost should simply reflect the price of its ingredients. What remains invisible is everything that sits behind the finished product.

The 'small school' argument

With edtech, and online platforms in particular, the visible tool will often represent the smallest part of the overall cost. There will be ongoing hosting costs, so that the platform can actually exist online and works reliably each day. There will likely be a team of developers regularly building and maintaining the software, updating it when operating systems change, fixing problems, improving accessibility and ensuring it can run on many different devices. Then there are the support teams, who will be required to respond if and when something doesn't work, or when staff need help implementing the tool effectively.

Training is another area that's frequently misunderstood. The cost of training school staff to use a specific tool won't go down because the school intends to only use it with one or two pupils rather than a hundred. The amount of prep time needed, trainer expertise, delivery of the session and follow-up support will work out as essentially the same. From the provider's perspective, supporting a school that intends to use a tool with two pupils will involve almost exactly the same level of time investment as supporting a school that plans to embed the solution across their whole establishment.

This is also why the 'small school' argument can be misleading. A school of 200 pupils may feel small internally, yet from the perspective of a company providing a platform or



program, the infrastructure needed to support said school often won't be fundamentally different to that required for a larger one.

When the tools disappear

Sustainability is another aspect that's rarely discussed. Free, or extremely cheap tools often begin as passion projects created by individuals or very small teams. In the early stages they can appear highly attractive to schools, as there's little or no financial commitment involved. The difficulty is that maintaining the software over time will typically require ongoing funding. Without a sustainable model, the founders eventually reach a point where they can no longer afford to continue.

The result is that the tools quietly disappear, become unstable or remain online but grow increasingly outdated as operating systems and security requirements change over time. Schools that have come to rely on them can suddenly find themselves without a viable option.

There's also the question of research and development. Educational tools rarely appear overnight; it can take years of work to ascertain needs, test different approaches, refine designs, liaise with schools and ensure that what's eventually produced genuinely supports learning, rather than simply looking impressive. By the time the product finally reaches a school, an enormous amount of unseen development will have already taken place.

'Disproportionate' costs

Perhaps the bigger issue sitting beneath all this is how assistive and supportive technologies are commonly viewed. When a tool is seen as something designed for '*one or two pupils*', every cost will feel disproportionate. It becomes a specialist purchase for a very small group of children.

When the same tool is understood as being part of a universal classroom provision and adaptive teaching, however, the conversation changes dramatically. Tools that support writing, organisation, reading access, communication or planning will rarely benefit only a handful of pupils. They'll often be able to support a much wider group of learners who might be struggling quietly, without having been given a label, alongside peers with identified needs.

Once supportive technologies are viewed as part of the everyday classroom toolkit, instead of a niche intervention, the conversation starts to move away from '*What's the cheapest alternative?*' and towards '*What provision will genuinely support the widest range of pupils in this school?*'. At that point, the investment starts to make much more sense.

Value over time

Which brings me back to our loaf of bread.

It's easy to stand in the supermarket and question why one loaf costs more than another, or why anyone would buy a ready-made loaf at all when flour and yeast are so readily available. Yet the loaf on the shelf represents not just the cost of ingredients, but the knowledge of how to make it properly, the equipment that produced it, the energy that baked it and the time invested in refining the process so that the end results are reliably consistent.

Beyond that, a professionally-produced loaf will usually stay edible for longer. The process has been refined, the ingredients balanced and the packaging designed with preservation in mind. My home-made effort, admirable though it might be, will likely start going stale after just a day or two.

Edtech works in a similar way. What schools see is the finished loaf sitting on the shelf. What they're *actually buying* is the infrastructure, expertise, maintenance and ongoing development that enables the product in question to keep working reliably over time. The product's value doesn't simply stem from the tool as it exists today, but from the assurance that it will still function, be supported and incrementally improved into next year and beyond.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abigail Hawkins BSc, MSc, FCCT has over 25 years of experience in SEND as a consultant, trainer and writer, having founded both the consultancy SENDCo Solutions (sendcosolutions.co.uk) and the online community SENsible SENCo (sensiblesenco.org.uk)

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THE TS GUIDE TO... ASSESSMENT

Why the machines might not be ready to take on your marking quite yet; how to ensure your students' performance in GCSE practicals is captured accurately; and what it takes to ensure students with SEND are fully supported in the exam hall...

IN THIS SECTION

IN FIGURES:

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE GCSE ENTRANTS MAKING THE GRADE?

218,000
students in England were still working towards a pass grade in at least one GCSE subject after Y11 in 2025

1.4 million
students sat the combined English language and literature GCSE in 2024; 6,605 from that cohort opted to take the combined A Level

116,000
Y13 students lacked a passing maths grade in 2025

Source: 'Curriculum Reboot' report produced Access Education, drawing on five years of DfE GCSE entry data

3 TEACHWIRE ARTICLES FROM THE ARCHIVES

12 BITE-SIZE ASSESSMENT IDEAS
Expand your secondary assessment knowledge in just 10 minutes with these 12 bite-sized pointers from a range of assessment experts
tinyurl.com/153special1

QUIZZING DONE RIGHT
Quizzing is a brilliantly simple and hugely effective assessment method – here's how to make it work in your classroom...
tinyurl.com/153special2

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO
Ongoing school assessment can help keep outcomes on track – but do your colleagues know what 'on track' actually looks like in practice?
tinyurl.com/153special3

AI, assessments and outsourcing

Could AI do your marking for you? That depends on what you mean by 'do', and which part of the marking process you're referring to, says **Anthony David**...

Walk around Bett, or any major edtech conference, and you'll hear the same confidently delivered sales lines: *AI will give you your evenings back*. These promises usually centre on marking – upload a stack of essays, and you'll instantly receive a set of grades, personalised feedback and even moderation support. Job done.

It's an attractive idea. In secondary schools across England, marking remains one of the most time-intensive and emotionally draining aspects of the job. Extended responses, coursework drafts, exam practice, internal assessments, mocks. Even where whole class feedback has replaced written comments, the cognitive load involved with reading, evaluating and diagnosing misconceptions remains substantial.

So *can* an AI actually do your marking for you? For that matter, should it? The honest answer is more nuanced than the marketing might suggest...

Where AI can help

AI performs strongest when the task it's been given is structured, the criteria explicit and the stakes relatively low.

AI can, for example, generate first-pass feedback on written work. Given a clear rubric and a piece of student writing, most current systems can identify surface level issues, such as missing structure, weak topic sentences, lack of evidence, repetitive vocabulary or unclear explanation. For teachers who already know what they're looking for, this can remove the 'blank page' problem – rather than starting your feedback from scratch every time, you're instead refining and adjusting.

AI can also support rubric alignment. When assessment criteria are clearly defined and exemplified, AI can sort responses into likely bands and highlight where specific criteria appear to have been met or missed. This isn't professional judgement; it's pattern recognition against provided descriptors. When the rubric is strong, the outputs tend to be stronger.

A third, and perhaps especially interesting use of AI for English in schools is to support moderation. Some emerging providers, including AIR Education (air-ed.com), are positioning their platforms as tools that will allow teachers to upload pupil work and receive assessment analysis aligned to frameworks, with the potential to enable quicker internal standardisation.

The appeal here isn't just speed – it's *consistency*. Instead of waiting weeks or months to co-ordinate moderation across departments or partner schools, teachers can receive earlier signals about whether judgements are drifting.

Stretching credulity

Visitors to Bett and other such events will have likely seen companies promoting products that promise instant feedback on handwritten GCSE responses, thus compressing the time between student submission and meaningful response. This is a powerful idea in principle, since the shorter the feedback loop, the greater the potential impact on learning.

> **"The safest model isn't 'AI as marker', but 'AI as assistant' – it suggests, you decide"**

Such claims are not entirely empty – AI *can* indeed reduce certain kinds of workload – but they only tell half the story. These claims start to stretch credulity when they bump up against the fact that AI struggles with assessment requiring deep subject expertise, contextual interpretation and professional judgement.

In subjects such as English literature, history, RE or politics, the quality of an answer doesn't just come down to structure; it's just as much about a student's ability to deploy insight and nuance, and demonstrate conceptual understanding and disciplinary thinking. A response can be technically sound, yet intellectually thin, or equally unconventional, yet perceptive. AI often encounters difficulties when making such distinctions.

Confident errors

Then there's the issue of fairness. An AI can be *consistent* while still being wrong. If its training data or prompts reflect narrow norms, it could misinterpret writing from EAL students, neurodivergent learners or pupils whose expression doesn't follow typical patterns.

Ofqual has been clear in its commentary on AI use in marking that technical capability, fairness and transparency all matter. Even in regulated qualifications, the question isn't simply whether AI can mark, but whether it can do

so reliably and equitably.

Additionally, there's the problem of confident errors. AI systems can produce highly plausible feedback that's factually incorrect, or entirely misaligned with the task at hand. In marking terms, this would amount to praising a misconception because it's well expressed, inventing errors that aren't present or overlooking key misunderstandings. If teachers accept AI outputs uncritically, they risk increasing, rather than reducing their workloads through corrections and reworking.

Relief from repetition

When teachers say they '*Want AI to do their marking*', they're rarely asking to outsource their professional judgement. What they're actually asking for is *relief from repetition*.

It could therefore help to break the process of marking down into the following three components:

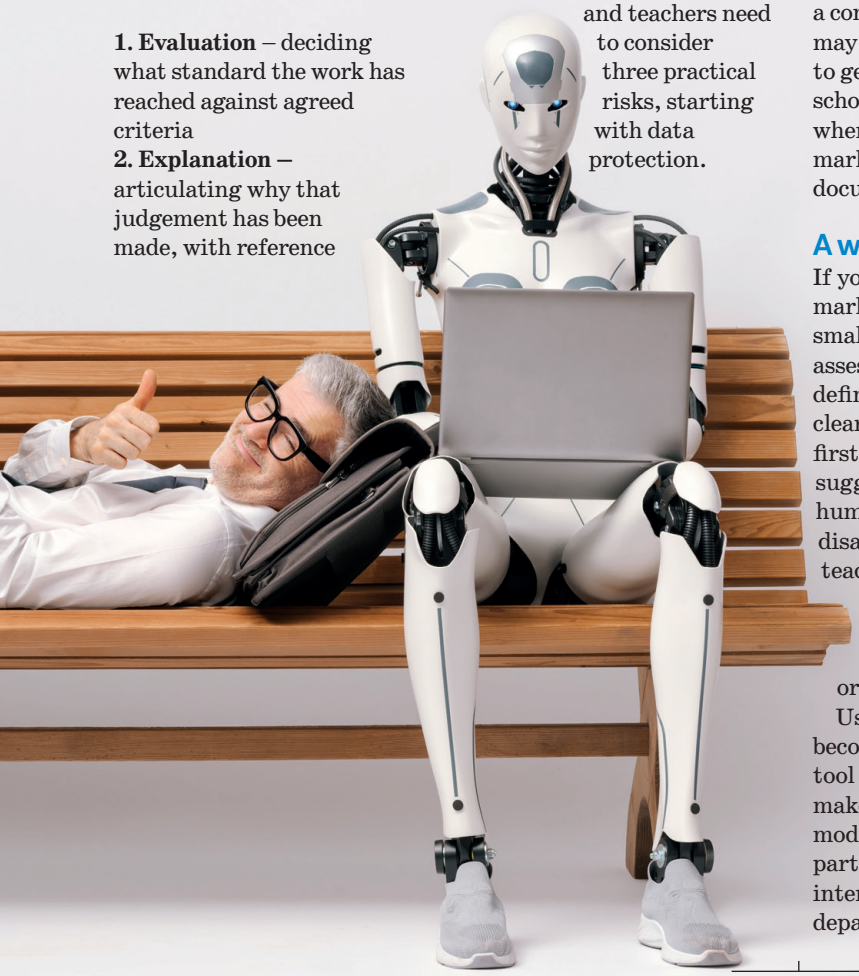
1. Evaluation – deciding what standard the work has reached against agreed criteria
2. Explanation – articulating why that judgement has been made, with reference to evidence in the work
3. Next steps – identifying precise actions the student should take to improve

AI can be most helpful with the 'explanation' and 'next steps' components – drafting comments, suggesting targets and highlighting patterns across a class. It's far weaker when asked to replace evaluation entirely, particularly within high-stakes contexts.

The moment AI starts making final evaluative decisions, the stakes change. Marks aren't just numbers; they influence self-perception, parental trust and institutional accountability. Even in formative settings, grades carry social weight. For now, the safest model isn't 'AI as marker', but 'AI as *assistant*'. It suggests, you decide.

Professional risk

Before embracing AI-enabled marking, secondary leaders and teachers need to consider three practical risks, starting with data protection.



Uploading pupils' work – particularly handwritten scripts or personal data – will require clarity around storage, processing and model training. Claims of GDPR compliance are necessary, but not sufficient. Schools will require due diligence processes and clear policies about what can and can't be shared.

Next, reliability. When an AI-generated judgement is challenged, it can't attend a parent meeting, but the teacher can. Consequently, every AI-supported decision must be reviewable and defensible. If you can't explain how a grade was reached without referring to an opaque system, you'll be on shaky ground.

Finally, there's the matter of integrity. The Joint Council for Qualifications has issued guidance regarding the use of AI in assessments, emphasising the need to protect qualification integrity (see tinyurl.com/ts153-AIA1). In a context where students may themselves be using AI to generate their work, schools must tread carefully when introducing AI into marking. Transparency and documentation matter.

A way forward

If you want to explore AI marking responsibly, start small. Choose a low stakes assessment type and then define a tight rubric with clear exemplars. Use AI for first-pass feedback and band suggestions, but retain human sign-off. Track disagreement rates between teacher judgements and AI outputs. If the discrepancies seem high, refine the rubric or stop the pilot.

Used in this way, AI can become a workload reduction tool rather than a decision-maker. Where instant moderation tools may prove particularly valuable is in internal standardisation. If departments can identify drift earlier, and focus human moderation time on borderline or contentious scripts, the efficiency gains could be real. Faster alignment will mean faster and more consistent feedback for students.

If the question is whether AI can replace the professional judgement of a secondary teacher in England, however, then the answer is no. Not safely, not ethically and not with the reliability required in high stakes systems.

If, on the other hand, the question is whether AI can reduce the time spent on drafting repetitive feedback, spotting common patterns and supporting internal moderation, then the answer is yes – albeit with clear guardrails.

The danger isn't that AI will assume your role; the danger is that it will be adopted uncritically and trusted too much, or dismissed entirely.

For now, the most productive stance is professional curiosity. Treat AI marking tools just as you would a new TA. Train them with clear rubrics. check their work regularly and use them to amplify your expertise, not replace it.

Your evenings might not return overnight, but when used wisely, AI could help you spend less time writing the same comment for the 20th time, and more time thinking about what your pupils actually need next.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Anthony David is an executive headteacher and author of the book *Education With AI* – an analysis of how AI can support education at all levels, what pedagogy will be impacted and why we should (and possibly should not) be adopting this technology

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Lights, camera, ACTION...

Dane Smith talks us through the process of setting your PE practical assessments up for success

When live GCSE PE assessment or moderation isn't possible, teachers will need to record their students' performances digitally – so here are some tips to help ensure the process runs smoothly....

1. Be clear as to the requirements

To make moderation as straightforward as possible, make sure you're familiar with the essential conditions for recordings.

Candidates should always introduce themselves at the start, stating their name, candidate number, player/bib number and the position or lane they'll be in, if applicable.

Centres/candidates can then record one or both aspects of the assessment. A candidate could, for example, perform live in the 'Skills in isolation' section and submit recorded evidence for the competitive 'Application of skills' section, or vice versa. Any 'Application of skills' filming must capture the entire performance, however – such as a full football game.

Recordings must be made under controlled conditions – teacher assessors can't coach candidates during the assessment process. Assessment judgments must then be based only the recorded evidence submitted for moderation, and not on any other observed performance. Edited highlights of a performance aren't an acceptable form of evidence.

Including a timeline that highlights the assessment criteria achieved is encouraged (especially in team games), but not compulsory. It's also advisable, though not mandatory, to record all candidates in case of injuries before or during the moderation period.

2. Capture footage effectively

When filming assessments, the main aim is to keep things clear, simple and easy to follow – so here's what to focus on.

Firstly, film the evidence in one continuous take, with a clear, unobstructed view of all candidates, ensuring they remain in shot at all times. Where possible, switch to different angles – wide angles (preferably from an elevated position) are best for capturing an overall view of a game, competitive situation and/or performance. Close range is better for capturing specific skills and techniques.

Remember to capture the result of the performance too, such as where the ball lands after a tennis shot.

3. Choose your device carefully

Different situations can be better suited to different recording technologies. A traditional camera with zoom capabilities can provide stable footage for most activities, while iPad cameras and similar portable devices are generally better for indoor or close-range recording. Be cautious when using mobile phones, however, since poor resolution and instability can affect the quality of evidence.

GoPro cameras work best for outdoor activities, or when following a candidate's movements. Drones can effectively capture activities that are difficult to film from the ground, such as cross-country events.

AI-assisted cameras – such as those from VEO, Hudl, Pixellot or Ballercam – are commonly used for team sports, and can even include player tagging options for assessment and moderation purposes.

4. Review what NOT to include

While recordings can't be edited, filming *can* be stopped between irrelevant sections. Consider putting the camera down during warm-ups, which are essential for preparation, but don't form part of the assessment.

Coaching during a PE assessment is forbidden, but if a teacher assessor feels they need to change combinations, or the structure of practice to show their candidates more favourably, pausing filming to achieve this is acceptable. Recordings can also be stopped during half time, intervals or periods of movement between play.

SHOULD I RECORD THE LIVE MODERATION DAY?

One question I hear a lot is whether the live moderation day itself needs to be recorded. To clarify, recording this isn't compulsory, but DfE guidelines state that centres can request a 'Review of Moderation or Marking' if the performance(s) seen on the moderation day have been recorded.

Some centres might wish to record moderation day activities to facilitate later reviews, despite this being optional. Audiovisual evidence of sample performances that can't be moderated live is compulsory, however, and should be made available to moderators.

If a Review of Marking is requested, only material seen by the moderator on the moderation day should be submitted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dane Smith is a Pearson Edexcel GCSE and A Level PE Senior Assessment Associate; to find out more about Pearson's work to cultivate a creative curriculum, visit go.pearson.com/creatives

You may start the exam... HOW?

Asmaa Ahmed explains why it's rarely the final GCSE exams that will trip SEND students up, but more everything else that surrounds them...

Anyone who has ever worked in a secondary school during exam season will recognise how quickly a student's confidence can unravel as they enter the exam hall. It can sometimes happen before they even read the first question.

This will rarely be down to the exam itself. More often, it's those small, easily overlooked changes that can tip things off balance – being in an unfamiliar room; seeing an invigilator giving the instructions instead of a teacher; the sudden, silent formality of exam conditions.

For some students, particularly those with SEND, these shifts will be enough to turn what would be a manageable assessment into an overwhelming experience – which is why GCSE outcomes for students with additional needs will so often depend on the environment they encounter *around* the exam, rather than just the paper in front of them.

Amplified stress

In theory, exams are designed to measure knowledge and understanding. In practice, they also test a student's ability to cope with uncertainty, pressure and sensory demand.

Secondary teachers will see this every year. A student who can confidently explain their ideas in lessons freezes when faced with a timed exam paper. Another rushes through questions they would normally answer carefully. Others can become distressed or disengaged the moment the assessment environment changes.

For students with autism, ADHD, anxiety or trauma-related needs, exam conditions can do more to amplify their stress than reveal their level understanding. The combination of silence, strict procedures and time pressures can place additional demands on an individual's working memory and emotional regulation.

When that happens, the exam stops being purely a measure of learning and instead becomes a measure of how well a student tolerates stress.

Intention versus experience

Most schools are deeply committed to fairness. Access arrangements will be carefully discussed, documented and approved. Teachers will want their students to succeed, but fairness doesn't live in the paperwork; it lives in the reality of how the exam experience feels to the student.

An access arrangement agreed on paper doesn't automatically become effective when put into practice. Extra time, rest breaks or the use of a word processor can still feel awkward or unsettling if a student hasn't been able to use them regularly beforehand. Support can fall flat if delivered by an unfamiliar adult, or in an environment that feels dramatically different from the one students have practised in before.

In secondary settings, where exam board regulations and formal procedures shape how assessments are delivered, this gap between intention and experience will often come down to familiarity and consistency. Access arrangements introduced late, or used only in formal exams can feel more disruptive than supportive. GCSE assessment, after all, should be about preparation, not just the effectiveness (or otherwise) of access arrangements

> ***"When access arrangements are embedded early, they stop feeling like adjustments"***

High stakes moments

One of the biggest differences between primary and secondary assessment is that GCSEs concentrate performance into a small number of high stakes moments. This means that students' preparation isn't just about them revising the content, but also helping them become familiar with the conditions in which they will be assessed.

When access arrangements are embedded early, they stop feeling like adjustments. A

student who regularly uses a laptop in class will feel more confident using one in an exam. A student who takes supervised rest breaks as part of their everyday support is less likely to feel singled out when those breaks appear during formal assessment.

The most effective support across schools tends to come from predictability, rather than perfection. One useful opportunity for building that familiarity is mock exams. For many students with SEND, mocks are a rehearsal for testing both their subject knowledge and experiences of the exam hall. Practising access arrangements, routines and procedures in these lower stakes assessments lets students become comfortable with the environment they'll be in, long before exam day.

Ensure predictability

For many students with SEND, knowing what will happen and in what order can be crucial, as small uncertainties can quickly escalate: '*Where will I be sitting?*' '*Who will be supervising the room?*' '*What happens if I don't understand the instructions?*' '*What if I need a break?*' When these questions go unanswered, anxiety fills the gap.

Teachers who take the time to walk students through the process ahead of time will often see a noticeable difference. Practising exam routines, explaining procedures clearly and keeping environments consistent can reduce cognitive load, allowing students to focus on demonstrating their knowledge.

The importance of predictability extends beyond people and spaces to the actual tools students use. When digital tools, laptops and assistive technology are embedded and used consistently in everyday classroom practice, they will instantly feel familiar, rather than yet another factor adding to the pressures felt during an exam.

Memory and goodwill

Behind the scenes, support for SEND students during exams will often rely on a series of informal systems. Teachers give one another verbal reminders. Notes are passed on in corridors. Key information about a student's needs sits in someone's memory. This approach can work – until it doesn't.

Staff absence, timetable pressures and busy exam periods can result in important details getting missed. A student may be supervised by an adult who is unaware of their access arrangements. A break that a student relies on may be forgotten. When things go wrong, it won't be because people don't care, but because the system as a whole relies on a number of individuals holding everything together under pressure.

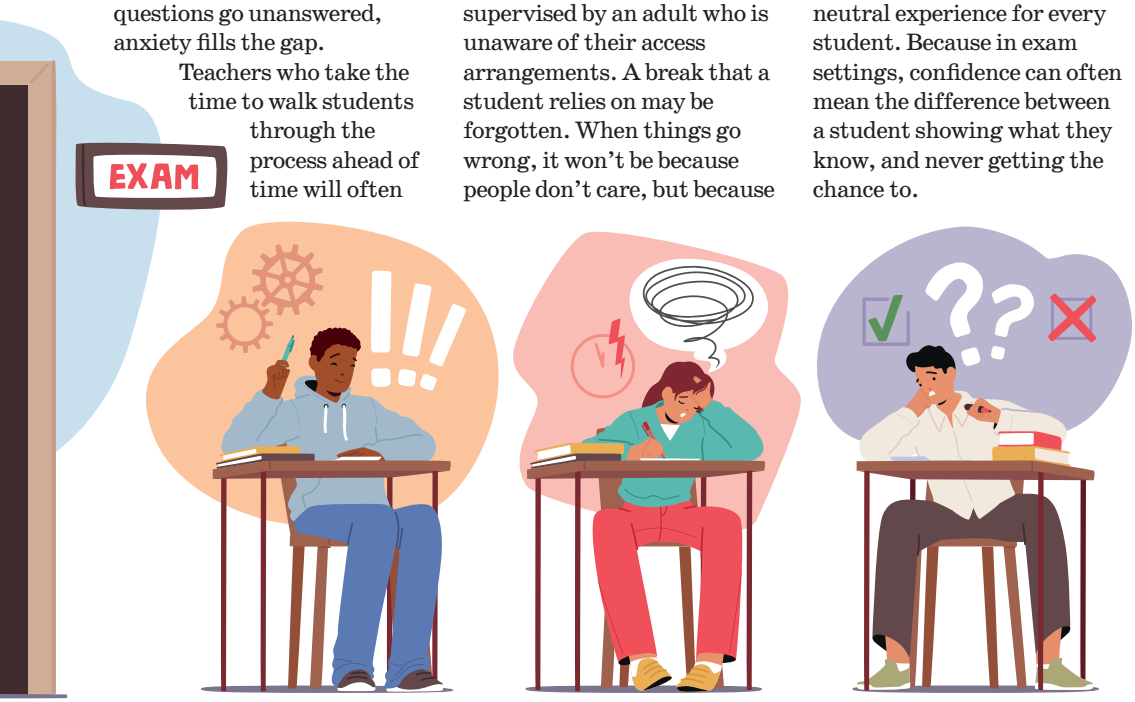
In practice, joined-up systems don't have to be complex. It can simply be a case of ensuring that clear and accessible information is made available about a student's usual way of working, so that anyone involved in supervising the exam understands precisely what support is needed.

Without such shared understanding and communication, there'll be greater levels of inconsistency that have a direct impact on students.

Familiar spaces

One consistent pattern across schools is the importance of *familiarity*. For some students, a familiar adult can make all the difference between coping and shutting down. That means someone who understands the student's triggers, knows when to offer reassurance and can provide support without drawing attention. Perhaps the most important shift of all is to stop treating exam adjustments as an unusual exception to normal school life.

Assessment will never be a neutral experience for every student. Because in exam settings, confidence can often mean the difference between a student showing what they know, and never getting the chance to.



GCSE SEND SUPPORT – WHAT WORKS?

1. Create a one-page 'usual way of working' profile
This is a short summary outlining how a student typically works, the support they use each day and what can help them if they become overwhelmed.

2. Early exam rehearsals
Let students with access arrangements practise under exam conditions, so that the environment on the day feels familiar.

3. Use 'exam language'
Students should hear the same instructions and phrasing used during both practice assessments and real formal exams.

4. Provide low-stimulus spaces where needed
Reducing noise, movement and visual distraction can significantly improve students' focus and emotional regulation.

5. Use trusted SEND guidance
Organisations such as the Educational Endowment Foundation (education endowmentfoundation.org.uk), Independent Provider of Special Education Advice (ipsea.org.uk) and Scope (scope.org.uk) can all provide practical guidance regarding reasonable adjustments and inclusive exam practice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Asmaa Ahmed is a former primary 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

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ASK THE EXPERT

Making teachers' lives easier

Author Jo Haycock gives an insight into the choice and design of Hachette Learning's latest Green-and-Pink-Hair resources for AQA A-Level psychology

What were your main objectives when producing these resources?

Since psychology teachers first saw the 2015 specification, there have concerns about the volume of content and the placing of psychology exams early within the series. AQA's teaching specification for 2025/26 onwards has reduced the content in many areas, while updating others, but there have been no changes to the assessment objectives or style of questioning – perhaps prompting some to question how this extra time might be most effectively used.

These considerations, alongside teacher feedback, have been very much central to my thinking when designing these revised Year 1 Digital resources. I wanted to make psychology teachers' lives easier!

What are the main ways in which these resources differ from the older versions?

We saw this as an opportunity to look again at how to support students and teachers in building skills, practical experience of research methods and confidence in extended answer writing as early on in the course as possible, so that it would start to become second nature. We have also added new resources to every chapter, some of which are focused on specific skills – such as how to better prepare students to answer the 'design a study' questions, for example.

What changes or additions do you think teachers are most likely to welcome?

When previously using the digital resources in my own classroom, I often felt I lacked the time to set students research assignments using the practical ideas in the student book and additional suggestions in the teacher resources. This refresh provides the chance to do just that, while forming more direct links with research methods. Teachers know that these types of activities are important, but that they can often fail to capture students' imagination.

When teaching, I would happily print off the handouts but often neglect the 'Ideas' material presented in many chapters, which was a shame, since these would often link with real-world experiences and/or provide valuable stretch-and-challenge opportunities. I'll definitely now be incorporating these more into my new scheme of work.

EXPERT PROFILE

NAME:
Jo Haycock

JOB TITLE:
Associate Lecturer, Open University; formerly Head of Sixth Form and Psychology

AREA OF EXPERTISE:
Teacher, examiner, researcher, reviewer and author

BEST PART OF MY JOB:
being able to talk about psychology all day long, and knowing that our resources are helping busy teachers and students

From the teacher feedback you received, which comments stood out most?

A common theme was that teachers wanted more model answers, which we've responded to by adding two new resources to each chapter that task students with assuming the role of examiner. The aim is to give them confidence and more clarity on what's actually expected of them, and regular opportunities to improve example answers.

Teachers are provided with commentary in the notes that consolidates the explanations, so that they can confidently explain common mistakes and ways of improving answers. One of the resources for each chapter focuses on shorter questions, and another on longer questions, including some application examples – again, in direct response to teacher feedback.

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Now you're talking MY LANGUAGE...

Neil Parker asks whether the key to engaging students with MFL might be to harness the informal language learning processes of the online spaces where they spend their leisure time...

There have never been as many opportunities available for learning a new language, yet for many students, nothing has really changed.

I recently read an article on LinkedIn, in which the author made the point that "*There has never been a better time to learn languages*". He went on to explain what we already know about access to target languages having never been easier than now. Language students can, should they wish, find a never-ending supply of foreign language speakers writing about and discussing pretty much any topic imaginable, simply by typing a few words into Google, YouTube or ChatGPT.

The author then proceeded to list all the ways in which students should look to engage with the very latest technology. However, at no point did this author – an experienced teacher – engage with the electronic elephant in the room; namely, that students are NOT currently taking advantage of the fact that there's never been a better time to learn languages than now...

Background noise

Why does it remain as difficult as ever to persuade the average student to engage with a language independently of their textbooks and teachers?

After nearly 25 years of teaching Spanish, French and Italian, it seems clear to me that whatever tools we have at our disposal as teachers won't move the needle on student engagement. What we have to consider instead is what our students actually *want* from a language, and what will make them want to embrace learning a language as something useful to them.

Watching, say, the Spanish TV series *Money Heist* on Netflix with English subtitles may be a fun experience, but with their focus more on the plot than the Spanish being spoken, this won't do much to actually develop a student's language skills. If anything, it's actually worse than that, because while the student may *think* that they're improving, the truth is that they've just been reading English while the foreign language they're meant to be studying is reduced to mere background noise.

This all seems very depressing and negative. Am I saying that the cornucopia of technological language offerings now available to students won't help them in the slightest? Have we really made no progress *at all* since the days of black and white pictures in a textbook describing where '*la famille Lafayette*' happen to have gone on holiday?

Thankfully, the answer is that there is, in fact, much that's positive about language learning for this particular generation of digital natives. The issue is how we harness it.

Change the context

The thing is, young people are more than happy to use the target language – just *not with their teachers* and *not in class*.

"Young people are more than happy to use the target language – just not with their teachers, and not in class"

Give a student a boring question about what they'll do in the future to help the environment, and you'll have reduced language learning to the classroom. They're being asked to perform a task where they have no evidence of previous success. Besides that, they can't really see the point of engaging with the task – if it's only to do with their exams – until some point in the future.

So let's change both the context and the task. Instead, let's imagine our student is in an online multiplayer game, where they need to engage with other players before they can ascend to level 5 on the planet Quarg, in an ongoing fight against the latest alien lifeform to have emerged from some far-flung corner of the universe.

Their fellow players won't care about the mistakes they might make when speaking Spanish. Our student is, after all, less concerned with conjugations and adjectival agreements than they are with exchanging whatever information might be necessary in order for them to achieve their objective.

Shared interests

If we unpick this a little, we can see that what's changed is the motivation of the student when it comes to the language task. The language no longer pertains to a piece of schoolwork, such as a history essay, maths question or poetry analysis assignment. The context is now something *essential*,

motivating our students to use the language to accomplish something far more immediately important than some far-off GCSE grade. They can level up in their favourite game, right here, right now.

A cursory internet search of whether students are more active and willing linguists if they regularly play online games reveals some clear themes. Students are drawn to the idea of communicating with like-minded peers who won't judge them on mistakes, because the conversation isn't taking place in a public space, such as a classroom.

Students can develop friendships quickly, since they're already demonstrating a shared interest in the game or platform they're engaging with. My students have previously commented on the fact that since they're already talking about a shared interest when together in a shared platform or game space, it's instantly much easier to make themselves understood.

This is all well and good, but as every teacher and parent knows, the issue of safeguarding and associated dangers of navigating platforms that aren't moderated or even supervised raises potential risks. No language teacher could blithely suggest to all their classes that they simply get online and go meet some people – so does that scupper it as an option?

A new platform

Well, there is a third model. What if the education sector could work with games developers on creating safe platforms that students actually *want to use?* What if language teachers, developers AND STUDENTS worked together on creating a shared space that could be reliably monitored and safely secured, whilst still providing all the playability offered by the likes of *Fortnite*, *Roblox* or *Minecraft*?

If we could combine the knowledge and expertise of teachers, developers and students, while also putting some rigorous and unobtrusive monitoring in place, we'd have the formula for a platform that creates effortless language learning.

Such a project would, however, require considerable vision, persistence and investment. There are many reasons for why it might not work, but I'm convinced that now is the time to at least start investigating the possibilities.

The Duolingo success story shows perfectly how gamifying language learning via widely understood game conventions and social media mechanisms can work to great effect in terms of engaging students. Duolingo, after all, was the result of creators Luis von Ahn and Severin Hacker wanting to create a useful, education-based platform that utilised mobile phone technology.

I know that all the components needed for a safe language-learning game platform that students genuinely want to play are already out there. It's just a case of bringing them together in the right way.

Despite all the different methods of accessing other languages now available to us all, I'd take issue with that aforementioned LinkedIn author about there having never been a better time for learning another language than now. If you're an ordinary student, with no particular linguistic flair or passion, then nothing will have really changed in terms of your relationship with language.

I'd argue that what *has* changed is the opportunity now in front of us. There's never been a better time to build something that genuinely works – because the moment language learning starts to feel like play, rather than effort, is the moment when it will finally take hold.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Neil Parker is head of Spanish at Caterham School, Surrey

TRUE INCLUSION?

Terri Bottriell-Wyse shares her reflections on the government's recently published 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' White Paper...

Having worked in special needs education for 24 years, the suggestion that we might finally create a truly inclusive education system is music to my ears.

For too long, those working in SEND have felt like buskers on the system's streets – playing passionately while most pass by without glancing, rarely stopping to consider the needs of the children we serve.

The government's 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' White Paper sets out a series of ambitious reforms with a strong focus on SEND provision (see tiny.cc/ts153-SWP). It presents a vision of a system that's both more inclusive and capable of delivering high standards for all. Rather than relying on a single big change, it attempts something far more complex – a realignment of multiple moving parts working together over the next decade.

Bringing sidelined children back

This is an important moment in education policy. The vision is strong, and exactly what our children deserve, articulating what those of us in the sector have been saying for years. The government's stated ambition to end the SEND crisis by improving inclusion and outcomes is both morally and educationally right, and long overdue. And yet, despite the promise, I can't help but feel there may be no grand finale to this particular musical.

At its core, the paper aims to increase inclusion within mainstream schools, reduce reliance on costly independent specialist placements, improve early identification, and simplify what has become an overwhelmingly complex system. It speaks of bringing sidelined children back into the fold, re-engaging those who have withdrawn and restoring richness and breadth to the curriculum. On the surface, at least, this all seems highly positive.

> **"It's difficult to ignore the possibility that financial constraints are what's shaping these reforms"**

There are other welcome elements, too. Increased funding for disadvantaged pupils, recognition of the vital role played by support staff (though the silence on improved pay is difficult to ignore) and a renewed emphasis on enrichment and creativity. The proposal for 'Experts at Hand' support is also encouraging, as is the emphasis on collaboration and outreach.

Specialist inclusion bases

In my role as a special school headteacher and founder of Wyse Inclusion, I see daily the value of specialist knowledge being shared with mainstream settings. The proposal to extend this by developing specialist inclusion bases within mainstream schools seems particularly promising.

Done well, these bases could bridge the gap between mainstream and specialist provision. Having previously established and overseen a Moderate Learning Difficulty satellite provision within a mainstream secondary school myself, I've seen first-hand just how powerful this model can be.

However, the reality of implementation can't be ignored. These bases will have to be properly funded, staffed by specialists and supported with expertise from special schools, because without that, they risk becoming under-resourced units that fail the very children they're designed to support.

Some practical questions remain. What will happen in schools that lack the space for sensory rooms or breakout areas? How will these provisions be funded – not just initially, but sustainably? There's a real concern that new funding models could result in less investment per pupil than in specialist settings, so will this inclusion be driven by need or by cost?

Reform or reinvention?

That last point brings us to a central tension within the White Paper. SEND spending has risen sharply, at a time when local authority budgets are under immense pressure. With the current system undeniably broken, the need for a more sustainable one is plain to see.

Yet it's difficult to ignore the possibility that financial constraints are what's shaping these reforms. Inclusion isn't solely about physical placement, but the *quality of provision* within that placement. It must never become a cost-saving exercise.

At times, reading the White Paper gives me a sense of déjà vu. I'm very supportive of the proposed 'Best Start' offer, but it's hard not to reflect on those








children who have grown up over the past decade without access to the very similar support once provided through Sure Start.

The introduction of a layered SEND support structure – Targeted, Targeted Plus, and Specialist – suggests an attempt to standardise provision and reduce postcode variation. Alongside this, the proposal to replace most Education, Health and Care Plans with digital 'Individual Support Plans' (ISPs) is one of the most significant and controversial changes.

On paper, this could streamline processes and ensure more timely support. In practice, it raises serious concerns. EHCPs currently provide enforceable legal protection for families; ISPs, as currently proposed, don't appear to carry the same weight. For many, this feels like a return to School Action, School Action Plus and Statements. It's difficult not to question whether this is genuine reform, or a reinvention of a system we've already moved beyond.

A troubling contradiction

Most concerning of all is the White Paper's lack of clarity around 'complex needs', which is a term on which much of the system appears to hinge. The paper often speaks of SEND as though it primarily relates to neurodiverse learners, whose needs could be met within mainstream settings with improved provision. In doing so, it risks overlooking those with the most significant and complex needs.

These children are largely referenced only in terms of remaining in specialist provision, beyond which they receive little attention, thus creating a troubling contradiction. The White Paper speaks of 'belonging' and 'inclusion' – yet by failing to define success for learners who may never access GCSEs, it risks reinforcing the very exclusion it professes to address.

Success for these pupils must be understood differently, through independence, communication, social development and quality of life. Without a clear vision of achievement for those with complex needs, the most vulnerable risk being overlooked once again. While the paper focuses heavily on systems and structures, it has far less to say about what these children should learn and how their progress ought to be recognised.

For many SEND pupils, the barrier they face isn't their ability to learn, but the system's narrow definition of 'success'. A rigid GCSE framework with limited alternative pathways leaves too many feeling as though they have failed. True inclusion requires a broader view of achievement.

This is an area where the government must listen carefully to special school leaders. If inclusion is to be meaningful, then the curriculum and accreditation must reflect the full diversity of need. If the term 'complex needs' remain undefined while the number of EHCPs is limited in favour of ISPs, then those disputes are unlikely to disappear any time soon.

Local education authorities may get to cut the costs associated with tribunals, but we'll likely see a rise in the number of complaints and disability discrimination claims, placing increased strain on schools and making their relationships with families actually worse, rather than better.

Unrealistic expectations

The White Paper does acknowledge that there's been a rise in incidents of aggressive behaviour directed towards staff, and its commitment to addressing this is welcome. However, the proposals feel somewhat disconnected from the realities of SEND. Behaviour can't be separated from need, and its absence of reference to developments in neuroscience relating to emotional regulation is notable.

A recurring theme throughout the White Paper is the assumption that mainstream teachers can, with training, become SEND experts. While professional development is indeed essential, this risks underestimating the depth of expertise required. SEND knowledge isn't acquired quickly; it's developed over years. To suggest otherwise undervalues that expertise and places unrealistic expectations on an already stretched workforce.

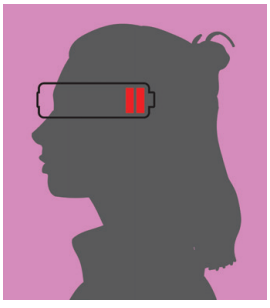
Inclusion isn't just about placing children in mainstream schools, but about ensuring those schools have the capacity, knowledge and support to meet their needs effectively, and can recognise when a more specialist environment may be required.

A glimmer of hope

Meaningful reform requires more than policy statements. It requires listening to the professionals and families who live with the realities of this system every day. The current period of consultation – set to run until 18th May 2026 – should at least ensure those voices are now heard.

The biggest hope for me has been the growing sense of momentum. In the weeks following the White Paper's publication, I attended conferences, meetings and training sessions with influential voices from across education and government. At each one, a single word dominated – *inclusion*. For the first time in my career, it feels as though those of us advocating for these children are finally being listened to.

But this listening must lead to appropriate action, rather than rushed or underfunded reforms. Give us the resources. Give us the support. Trust the expertise that already exists within the system. Because we're ready. We've always been ready.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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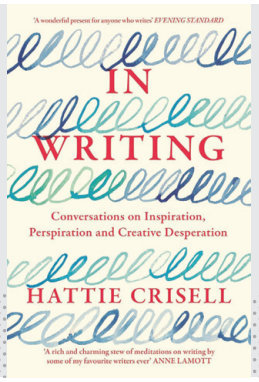
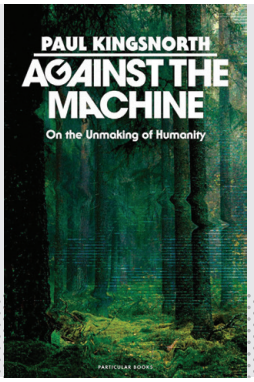
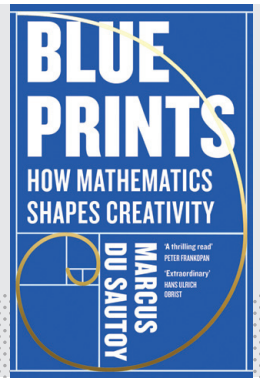






In Writing: Conversations on Inspiration, Perspiration and Creative Desperation

(Hattie Crisell, Granta, £10.99)

The problem with reading books on writing by different authors is that they all tend to be based on one person's experience, and can frequently contradict each other. Far better is a book like this, which contains multiple writers' responses to some key questions – including how they find flow, and that old standby of where their ideas come from. It's certainly interesting to find out how famous writers go about getting feedback and how they approach re-writes – a potential source of some solace for students, when they learn that even the experts can hate it too. There's wisdom here for inexperienced writers around the risks of overwriting and clunky, artificial dialogue. As Crisell herself observes, putting in the effort to ensure that readers have a good experience is simply good manners. An excellent resource.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

bit.ly/Eclecticism

Against the Machine: On the Unmaking of Humanity

(Paul Kingsworth, Particular Books, £25)

Have you ever considered that the relentless contemporary pursuit of economic growth, efficiency and digitisation may not be accidental? Many have also wondered whether artificial intelligence will become sentient, and what it will do if that comes to pass. These fears aren't especially new, but what's interesting with *Against the Machine* is Kingsnorth's way of approaching the material with what could be described as a 'biblical' perspective. It's a decision that may prove divisive among readers and, I suspect, potentially limit the book's appeal – but having committed, he does a good job of presenting the challenges we all face in the modern age and placing them in a sweeping historical context. There's much to discover here, including fascinating dives into the hidden histories and latter-day impacts of the UK's Enclosure Acts, the French Revolution and steady rise of modern surveillance technology. A fascinating and rewarding book.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

Blueprints: How mathematics shapes creativity

(Marcus Du Sautoy, 4th Estate, £22)

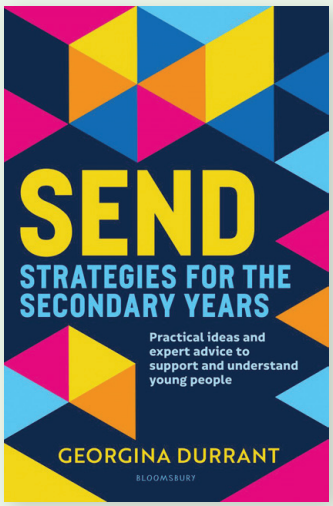
I can't say I fully understood all the maths in this book, but putting myself in a maths teacher's shoes, I see *Blueprints* as a godsend. Why? Firstly, because it answers that most dreaded of questions – *how is maths relevant to everyday life?* Secondly, because of the sheer range of topics and intriguing areas of maths that it covers. A cursory glance at the 'Dramatis Personae' included at the start reveals a list of composers, writers, architects and artists, plus several other professions you might not expect. Yes, *Blueprints* is no dry maths textbook, but rather a journey through various key mathematical concepts, as readers are shown how they've featured in nature, or been integrated into great works of art and craftsmanship over time. The concepts discussed include the circle, the Golden Ratio, fractals and randomness itself. The well-judged prose, combined with an impressive breadth of coverage, *makes* Blueprints a genuine pleasure to read.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman

ON THE RADAR

SEND Strategies for the Secondary Years

(Georgina Durrant, Bloomsbury, £18.99)



With the government's SEND White Paper prompting much discussion among secondary educators, now seems like good a time to get acquainted with the practical strategies for supporting KS3/4 students with SEND that Durrant lays out here.

Durrant's aim is to help teachers (and indeed parents) provide everyday support that's appropriate to the needs of children and young people with SEND in the here and now – which, in an age of lengthy waits for EHCPs and protracted system reforms, will likely find a receptive audience. The book is structured around seven chapters, each focused on a specific area of need – including speech language and communication, literacy, numeracy and motor skills, among others. Said chapters commence with a 'case study' panel recounting the experiences of a fellow practitioner or individual directly affected by the area under discussion, before proceeding to a helpful overview and breakdown of the different needs that may need addressing, with guidance on spotting visible signs and behaviours. The chapters then conclude with specific points of advice regarding actionable steps for both teachers and parents.

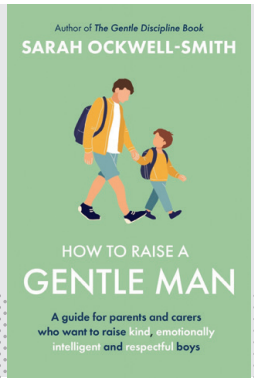
Said advice isn't exhaustive, but that's plainly not Durrant's intention. This is a book written for busy teachers who want to gain a better grasp of the multiple diverse, and sometimes intersecting learning needs that their classes might present them with – and in that, it very much succeeds.

The Penguin Book of Bengali Short Stories

(Arunava Sinha (ed.), Penguin, £14.99)

If you're looking for a way to address the English Programme of Study's requirements to include a range of sources and world literature, and want to get ahead of the incoming new curriculum's emphasis on diversity and different cultural perspectives, look no further. These stories provide glimpses into the history of Bengal and the everyday lives of the area's population – and at first, seem quite different in terms of style and subject matter than what 'western' readers may be used to. Many stories have a gentle, even matter-of-fact way of depicting situations, and some are deeply moving. The only frustration with this volume is the lack of dates for the stories, which might have helped readers establish their historical context. Nonetheless, it's a lovely collection, and one sure to provide plenty of material for discussions of writing technique – as well as being an enjoyable read in its own right. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Terry Freedman



How to Raise a Gentle Man

(Sarah Ockwell-Smith, Piatkus, £16.99)

The field of literature examining the behaviours and psychologies of boys and men has become something of a crowded one in recent years. Ockwell-Smith's starting point seems relatively simple – what does it take to raise sensitive, wise, compassionate boys in the modern age, when so much of the messaging they receive from the media they consume and the adults in their lives (including some at school) urges them to reject such 'feminine' attributes? In the course of unpacking what it will take to resist and overcome those influences, Ockwell-Smith casts her net wide to take in boys' early development, socialisation and other avenues not often seen in these kinds of discussions – such as making boys more aware of the discrimination faced by women and girls, and how boys can be raised to become feminists. It's a thoughtful book aimed primarily at parents, but one that could also give teachers and heads of years much to chew on.

Meet the author

SARAH OCKWELL-SMITH

How would you describe the book's central argument?

It's twofold – first, that society treats boys poorly by expecting them to be strong, less emotional and to do less 'gentle, feminine stuff'. The other half concerns the 'manosphere' and misogyny element. When first thinking about writing the book, I was shocked to discover that the leading cause of death in teenage boys is suicide. Not long after, my eldest son – a secondary school teacher – explained how the current leading cause of radicalisation in schools isn't rooted in religion, but in misogyny and sexism driven by other boys and men.

It felt like different puzzle pieces were slotting into place. Encouraging boys to be understanding, empathic, respectful, supportive and not be afraid of gentleness is still key – only now we've got the Tates, Myron Gaines and Jordan Peterson to reckon with. We have boys who are struggling to show their emotions and deal with how the world treats them, falling down the rabbit hole of thinking that the manosphere is the answer, because it makes them feel seen and heard.

In the book, you pre-empt those critics who hold that being 'pro-boys' necessarily means being 'anti-girls'...

I'm the strongest feminist you could possibly imagine. In my mind, the best way of helping women and girls *is to help boys.* When writing the book, the phrase that kept coming back to me is '*You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.*' We've got to understand boys and actually treat them well if we want to effect real change.

You also level some criticisms at schools for how they manage boys' behaviour – what do you feel they should be doing?

The main thing I'd like for teachers to take away from the book is that current RSHE efforts are effectively firefighting, rather than resolving the underlying issues. There needs to be a better understanding of brain development, and fewer lazy myths around boys being innately 'harder' or 'louder'. It could involve organising just a day of instruction around '*Here's how we got here, these are the real differences between boys and girls, here's why those differences occur*' before running those existing RSHE sessions.

In the book, I point out that teachers will usually punish boys more severely with discipline, but that can't happen. If we want to change how boys treat women and girls, then we've got to change how we treat boys first.

Sarah Ockwell-Smith is a parenting expert and childcare author specialising in the psychology and science of parenting; for more information, visit sarahockwell-smith.com

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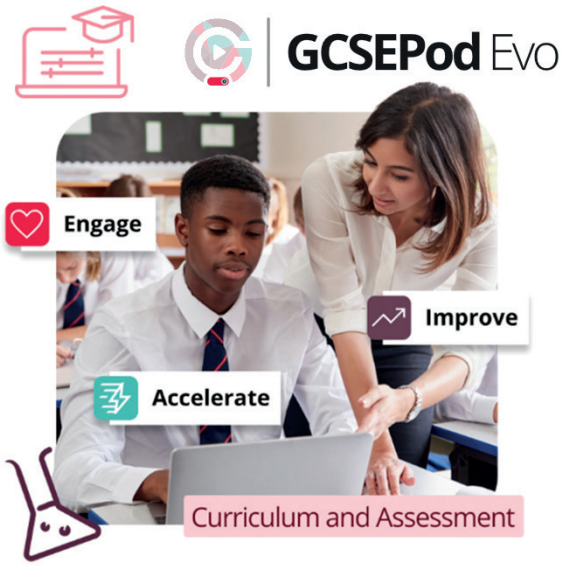
– Claire Middlehurst, Assistant Head, Hodge Hill Girls School



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Holding THE LINE

Kevin Connor looks at how trusts are managing rising cost pressures

The latest Academies Benchmark Report (see tinyurl.com/ts153-HTP1) arrives with a headline that has come to feel rare in recent years: '*Academy trusts are in a stronger financial position than before*'.

Only 37% of trusts reported in-year deficits during 2024/25, compared with 60% the year before, making for the strongest performance seen since 2022 – though that sense of improvement fades fast once you look beyond that sole figure. Confidence across the sector remains fragile, with the very cost pressures that the report seeks to highlight – including estate repairs, utilities, staffing and SEND provision – all continuing to intensify.

The report also shows that almost all trust types are forecasting a fall in their reserves over the next two years, with secondary single academy trusts expecting their reserves to drop by an especially sharp 43% by 2026/27.

Surpluses do exist, but they're not translating into security. This year's positive figures are underpinned not by an easing of financial pressures, but by tighter budgeting and funding adjustments that trusts hadn't expected when they originally set their budgets. In other words, trusts may have had a better year, but it didn't feel like one.

Financial burdens

This tension runs right throughout the report, and nowhere is it seen more clearly than in the areas where schools have the least amount of flexibility – namely their estates, energy costs and duties to pupils with additional needs.

The Benchmark Report groups estate repairs, utilities and SEND provision alongside staffing as the core pressures currently affecting trust finances. Taken together, these costs represent the operational backbone of a school system, which means that unlike some other areas of procurement, they can rarely be reduced without consequences being felt.

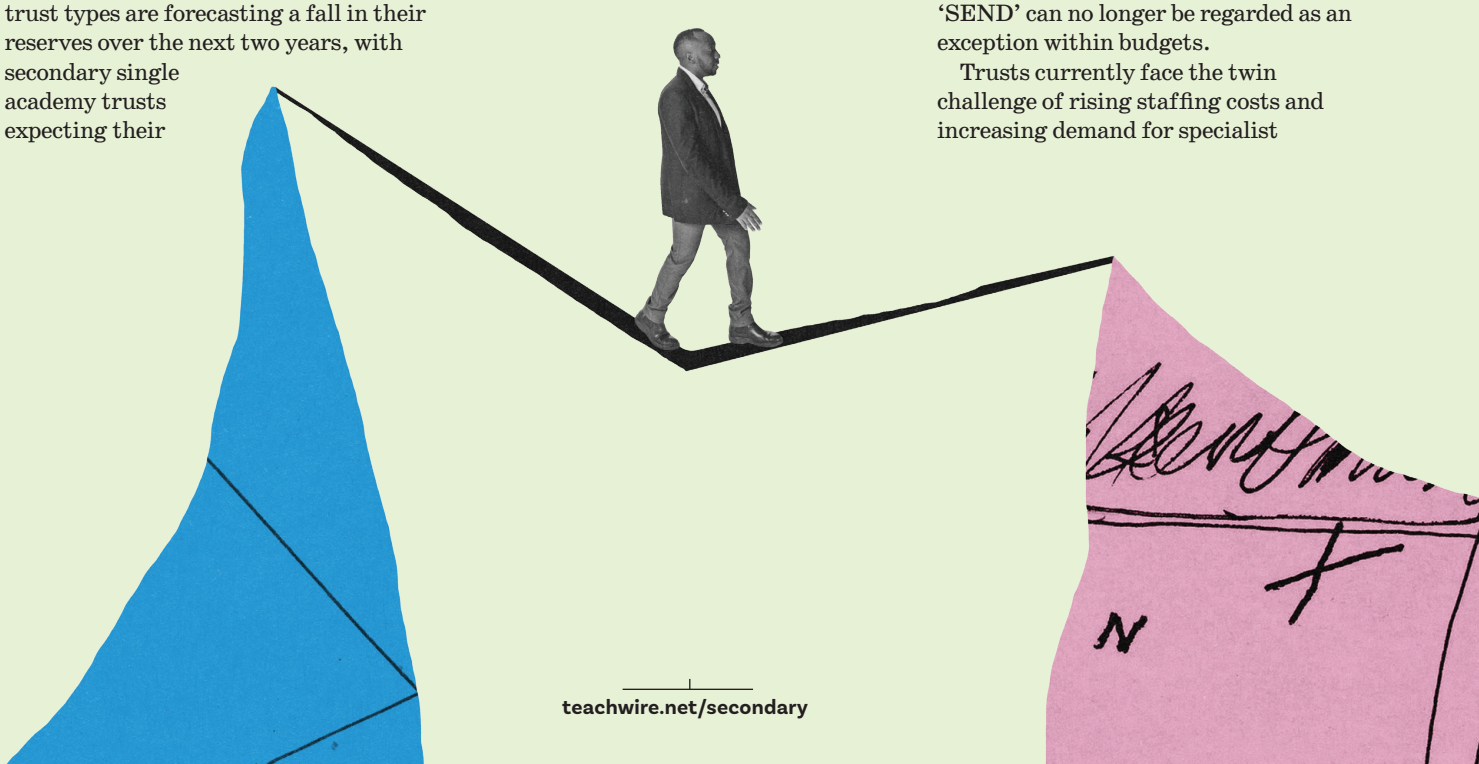
Estate repairs are highlighted as a growing challenge. School buildings require continual maintenance, and as buildings age, these costs rise. Repairs delayed in previous years often return at a higher cost, forcing trusts to prioritise urgent issues while postponing longer-term work. The report reinforces that these pressures are contributing to a wider inability across the sector to plan, invest and grow.

Utilities sit close alongside estates as a notable source of financial strain. While the report doesn't quantify year-on-year rises, it explicitly identifies utilities as one of the pressures leaving trusts operating in conditions that '*No private sector organisation would be expected to manage.*' Energy use also connects to the sector's stalled progress toward net zero. Nearly all trusts generated between 0.1 and 0.3 tonnes of CO_2 per pupil – almost unchanged from last year – and no further grants are expected through the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme. Without financial support, reducing energy consumption any further becomes difficult, while utility costs remain hard to control.

Costs of the core experience

SEND provision completes the trio of pressures. The report notes that the number of children with additional needs has grown to the point where 'SEND' can no longer be regarded as an exception within budgets.

Trusts currently face the twin challenge of rising staffing costs and increasing demand for specialist



provision, while also working within systems and local funding structures that may not reflect the level of need they're seeing. The pressure lies not only in staffing, but also in estates, learning spaces, accessibility requirements and the adaptations needed to support inclusion.

The common thread running across all three areas is that they shape the core experience of pupils and staff, and that their costs simply can't be trimmed without consequences.

How trusts are coping (and where the limits are showing)

The report paints a picture of the sector as one that's significantly tightened its financial systems. Trusts have benefited from careful budgeting, unexpected in-year funding and disciplined centralisation. The data shows that 86% of trusts now consider themselves fully centralised, and nearly half of large trusts pool their general annual grant or reserves – up from 41% last year.

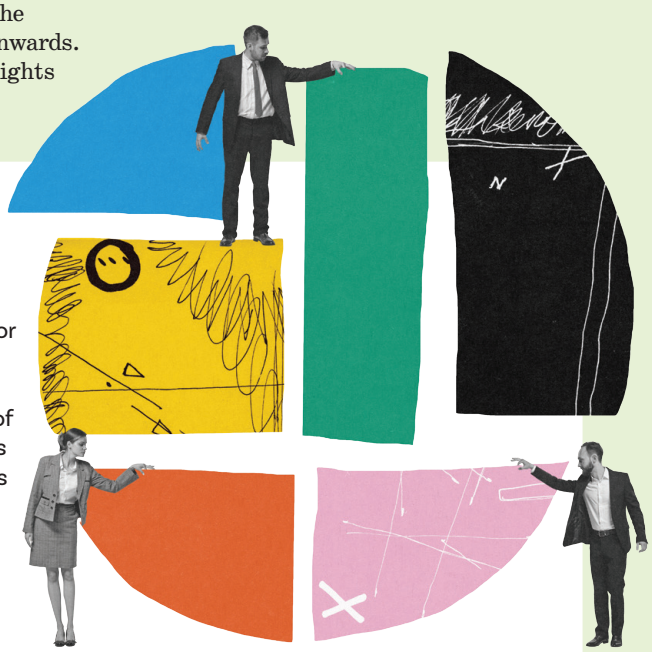
These strategies give trusts more control over procurement, support greater consistency across schools and allow them to share.

The financial variation between larger and smaller trusts also matters. Larger MATs reported average surpluses of £1.1 million, while smaller MATs and SATs averaged less than £50,000. The impact of this difference becomes clear when reserves are considered. Reserves in small trusts have already fallen to 11.5% of income, down from 13% the year before, while larger trusts held steady at 8%. The overall average shows that only 25% of trusts are below the 5% threshold considered to be a sign of financial vulnerability – but the direction of travel is still downwards.

The report repeatedly highlights how rising costs of staffing, estates, utilities and SEND are affecting long-term planning. Even surpluses don't necessarily free up resources. With reserves forecast to plummet in many trust categories, the financial headroom is tightening further. Some trusts may end the year in the black, but many will be using those surpluses just to manage pressures already in the system.

Strategies under strain

Larger trusts also have more capacity to plan and deliver major repairs. Their average surpluses of £1.1 million and steadier reserves give them more flexibility, and they also receive School Condition Allocation, which supports them in managing the kinds of estate and maintenance pressures highlighted



WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

This year's Academies Benchmark Report was accompanied by a survey of Trusts, which included asking staff to identify the top three risks they faced – here are some of the most common issues they pointed to...

1. Financial sustainability and funding
Insufficient government funding; lack of uplifts to the National Funding Formula and Minimum Per Pupil Level; funding not keeping pace with inflation or pay awards; depleted reserves; cashflow challenges

2. Pupil numbers and demographics
Forecasted declines in pupil numbers; local population shifts and increased competition for sixth form places impacting upon admissions, potentially leading to insufficient pupil intake

3. Staffing
Difficulties in attracting and retaining high quality teachers (particularly subject specialists), support staff, trustees and senior leaders; rising staff costs, including salaries, agency fees and national minimum wage increases; over-reliance on key individuals in leadership/governance roles with a lack of effective succession planning

4. SEND
Growth in number of pupils with high needs (often without corresponding funding, due to delays in awarding of EHCPs); funding for SEND provision not keeping pace with demand, leading to budgetary pressures; impact of not meting SEND pupils' needs on their subsequent outcomes

5. Estates, premises, and capital funding
Buildings in poor condition; growing backlogs of maintenance tasks, lack of capital funding for improvements; risks of premises-related safety and/or business continuity issues; unsuccessful Condition Improvement Fund bids

6. Cyber Security and IT
IT system failures; cyber security, including risks of hacking and data breaches; risks associated with GDPR compliance and other data protection measures

7. Regulatory and compliance
Changes to the Ofsted framework leading to the prospect of a fall in inspection grades; the potential introduction of a Trust-level Ofsted programme; safeguarding and child protection incidents; possibility of unforeseen external events impacting upon education delivery

8. Reputation and stakeholder management
Impact of rises in complaints, parental concerns and negative Ofsted inspections on Trust's reputation; relationships with external stakeholders, including parents and local authorities

9. And the rest...
Abuse of staff from external stakeholders; student behaviour leading to high suspension and exclusion rates; winding down and handover of Private Finance Initiative contracts; level of pressure on, and coping capacity of executive teams; pupil safety when travelling to school; the possible financial and compliance impacts of the Employment Rights Act 2025

"Surpluses do exist, but they're not translating into security"

within the report.

Smaller trusts, by contrast, work with far narrower margins. A surplus below £50,000 will be quickly consumed by even a single moderate-scale estate issue, while rising SEND needs create additional cost pressures that can't be distributed across a large school portfolio. For these trusts, disciplined financial planning remains essential, but discipline alone can't compensate for those limited reserves.

Across the sector, trusts are doing what they can to manage the pressures – centralising procurement, pooling resources, tightening oversight and monitoring their spending carefully – but these actions don't change the fundamental challenge. Costs are continuing to rise in areas where trusts have the least ability to reduce them.

The next 5 to 10 years

The Benchmark Report is focused on 2024/25, but its implications stretch far beyond the immediate financial year. Several trends highlighted in the data point to the kind of long-term pressures that trusts will need to navigate.

Firstly, growth across the sector is slowing. Trusts now average just under 14 schools, but only 36% expect to expand in the next 12 months (compared with 61% last year). Expansion often brings with it economies of scale that support procurement efficiency; with fewer trusts planning to grow, achieving those advantages may be harder.

The issue of emissions remains unchanged. Without additional decarbonisation support, utility costs and sustainability responsibilities will continue to outpace the capital available to address them.

School meal funding remains inadequate for most trusts, with only 11% reporting that their funding covers such provision. This diverts further resources away from estates, staffing and SEND, i.e. the very areas under the heaviest pressure.

Then there are staffing costs, which accounted for more than 75% of income across all trust types, and which compound every other challenge. With 90% of trusts now reporting rising staff costs as a major concern, planning for the long term has become even more challenging.

The report concludes that greater clarity on expected funding, ideally on a multi-year basis, would help trusts budget more accurately and potentially free up more reserves for investment. The need for that clarity is visible across all areas of pressure. Without predictable funding and sustainable support for estates, utilities and SEND, trusts may well find themselves increasingly reliant on surpluses that offer stability in the short term, but little protection in the long run.

Kevin Connor is head of academies at accountants, Bishop Fleming

IN FIGURES

Some key statistics from the Academies Benchmark Report 2026...

25%

of Trusts overall were found to hold less than 5% in reserves – the level that the DfE considers a sign of financial vulnerability. That's down from 31% in 2025, but still up from 2022, when that applied to 17% of trusts

13.6

The average number of schools in a MAT, up by 8% from the previous year

49%

of large trusts are now engaged in general annual grant/reserves pooling

89%

of Trusts state that the funding they receive for school meals is insufficient to cover the cost of providing them

86%

of Trusts are now fully centralised

36%

of Trusts expect to be expanding over the next 12 months – a drop of 25 percentage points, compared to the previous year

When the tech works, THEY WORK

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

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

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

An equity problem

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

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

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

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

A hidden dependency

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

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

These are the accommodations that make classroom participation possible for many SEND pupils, and they depend entirely on one condition – that the devices in question actually work. When a device fails, the accommodation disappears. There's no partial workaround when the text-to-speech software crashes.

What actually happens

The statistics in the report are worth sitting with. More than half of teachers say that when technology fails, their SEND students become frustrated or anxious about using it again. Over half observe disruption to established learning routines. Nearly 2 in 5 watch pupils lose confidence in their ability to complete the task at hand. 3 in 10 see students fall behind lesson objectives – not because of

KEY FINDINGS:

BUILDING CONFIDENCE, ENABLING SUCCESS

54%

of teachers see SEND students' learning disrupted by technology failures at least two to three times a month

55%

report frustration or anxiety in SEND students following device failures; 38% observe a loss of confidence

97%

of teachers report seeing SEND student confidence grow when they have reliable access to digital tools

63%

of teachers rank consistent, reliable performance as their top priority when choosing devices for SEND students. Only 13% prioritise lowest cost

2 HOURS 20 MINUTES PER WEEK

Average time spent by teachers troubleshooting technology for students with SEND

their SEND needs, but because the tool designed to address those needs has stopped working.

Over time, something more serious develops. 2 in 5 teachers report SEND students starting to avoid technology-based tasks and 13% describe a clear pattern of withdrawal. This matters, because the direction of travel is towards more digital integration, not less. Homework, assessments and resources now arrive online. A student who's learned to distrust classroom technology is one who's being shut out.

The contrast with mainstream students is telling. When a device crashes mid-essay, a student without SEND can, if needs be, simply pick up a pen and carry on.

A student with dysgraphia doesn't have that option. A student with working memory difficulties may lose their train of thought in the delay. A student with anxiety may find the disruption severe enough to derail the rest of the lesson for them. The same failure can land very differently depending on who it happens to.

The invisible cost

The report also documents what this costs teachers. In a typical week, secondary staff will spend an additional 2 hours and 20 minutes troubleshooting technology for SEND students; time not spent teaching, planning or marking, but on resolving tech problems. In a school with a hundred SEND students spread across multiple teachers, that can swiftly add up to hundreds of hours a year.

The effects of this may reach further into lesson planning than most school leaders probably realise. 4 in 10 teachers maintain backup plans specifically for anticipated technology failures. 1 in 10 report regularly modifying or abandoning lessons altogether because they're not confident that the required technology will hold up. Only 13% plan lessons on the straightforward assumption that the devices will function as anticipated.

That last figure deserves a pause. Fewer than 1 in 8 secondary teachers plan their SEND provision on the assumption that any required technology will simply work.

What changes when it works

Almost all teachers – 97% – report seeing SEND students' confidence grow when pupils have reliable digital tools. Two thirds say that students with dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD perform better academically when they can depend on those tools working every time.

As a result, there's more classroom participation, better homework completion and less anxiety around academic tasks. These are the outcomes inclusive education is designed to achieve. Reliability, it turns out, is what unlocks them.

When asked what they prioritise when choosing devices for SEND students, 63% of teachers put consistent, reliable performance first. Pre-installed accessibility software and ease of repair both came in at 42%, while only 13% prioritised lowest cost. These aren't the priorities of people indifferent to budgets, but the priorities of professionals who have learned from experience what actually makes a difference.

The procurement question schools avoid

There's an uncomfortable implication here for any school that selects devices based primarily on upfront cost. A device that fails regularly may appear affordable at purchase, but those hidden costs – in terms of teacher time, anxiety, lost learning and the slow erosion of a SEND student's willingness to try – may outweigh any savings. Schools are, in effect, buying a problem and paying for it in a currency that doesn't show up on a balance sheet.

It's no coincidence that ASUS commissioned this research. Its devices are engineered around precisely the priorities teachers in this survey identified.

Rugged, durable construction that handles the everyday realities of school life. Scratch-resistant, spill-resistant, tamper-resistant designs built for shared classroom use. All-day battery life that doesn't require charging between lessons. Fast boot-up and consistent performance to ensure that devices are ready when students are. Built-in security, pre-installed accessibility software and modular components that make repair straightforward, rather than a procurement headache. Reliability, in other words, treated as a design principle, rather than an afterthought.

When choosing technology for SEND provision, the question to ask isn't '*What does it cost?*' It's '*Will it work every time a SEND student needs it?*'

If the answer is uncertain, then that uncertainty will carry a price – one ultimately paid for by those students who can least afford it.

DOWNLOAD THE FULL REPORT

The 'Building Confidence, Enabling Success – How device reliability shapes SEND student outcomes in secondary schools' report is available to download free of charge.

Scan the QR code below to access the full report, including all survey data, findings by SEND condition and practical guidance for school procurement decisions.

Our national story

Aaron Swan reflects on how the exclusionary conception of Britishness increasingly expounded by certain political figures can be countered with reference to the country's literary history...

Matthew Goodwin, Reform's candidate in the recent Gorton and Denton byelection, remarked on social media last year that UK-born people from minority ethnic backgrounds aren't necessarily British, and that "*It takes more than a piece of paper to make somebody 'British'*" – but this definition is, it seems to me, refuted by the country's literary history.

Identity comes in many guises. Take sex, gender and sexuality, for example. The first is generally defined as a determinable, measurable and objective characteristic, while the latter two are more subjective characteristics, reflective of one's sensibility. These identities aren't dependent on one another, and while 'most' people with one set of sexual characteristics might identify with a 'particular' gender trait or sexuality, they're all mutually exclusive. Confirmation of sex isn't confirmation gender, and nor is it confirmation of sexuality.

'Where are your parents from...?'

We can extend this acceptance of mutually exclusive traits to our understanding of 'nationhood', and the sense of duality that tends to go with it. On the one hand, there's the discernible and concrete nationhood assigned to each and every individual at birth – the nation in which you are born, from which one is entitled to a set of rights granted by the state.

Then there's the emotional, more abstract idea of nationhood that can be reflected in how one chooses to live one's life, such as what music, food and celebrations one chooses to participate part in. Both conceptions of nationhood could be seen as 'Britishness' or one's 'cultural identity' – but that's where the difficulties set in. When someone talks about 'Britishness', they may be equivocating between both definitions, with our perceptions of what they're saying subject to our own unconscious biases towards one definition over the other.

The question of nationality is one that can often be pitched as "*Where you from, mate...? Nah, nah, before that. Like, where are your parents from...?*" The equivocation here is that firstly, one's birth certificate identifies one's 'Britishness', *then* one's heritage if the answer fails to align with our prejudices. The query asserts that our British sensibility is *derived* from our determinable nationhood, But this is a false equivalence equal to conflating sex, gender and sexuality.

Tales of life and death

We are each born *tabula rasa*; none of us arrive with a cultural nationhood from birth, and no child is ever born signing their national anthem. A nation's set of ideals isn't innate within one's genetics, but rather behaviourally developed through various interactions with our families, friends, schools, neighbours and popular culture.

Goodwin's argument is at least right in one sense, in that it does take more than a piece of paper to make a person British – assuming he's referring to the *sensibility* of being British. So what, then, is the cultivated and tilled story of Britain? Our literary tradition has, I believe, much to offer on this matter, in a way that I think is fascinating.

> **"None of us arrive with a cultural nationhood from birth, and no child is ever born signing their national anthem"**

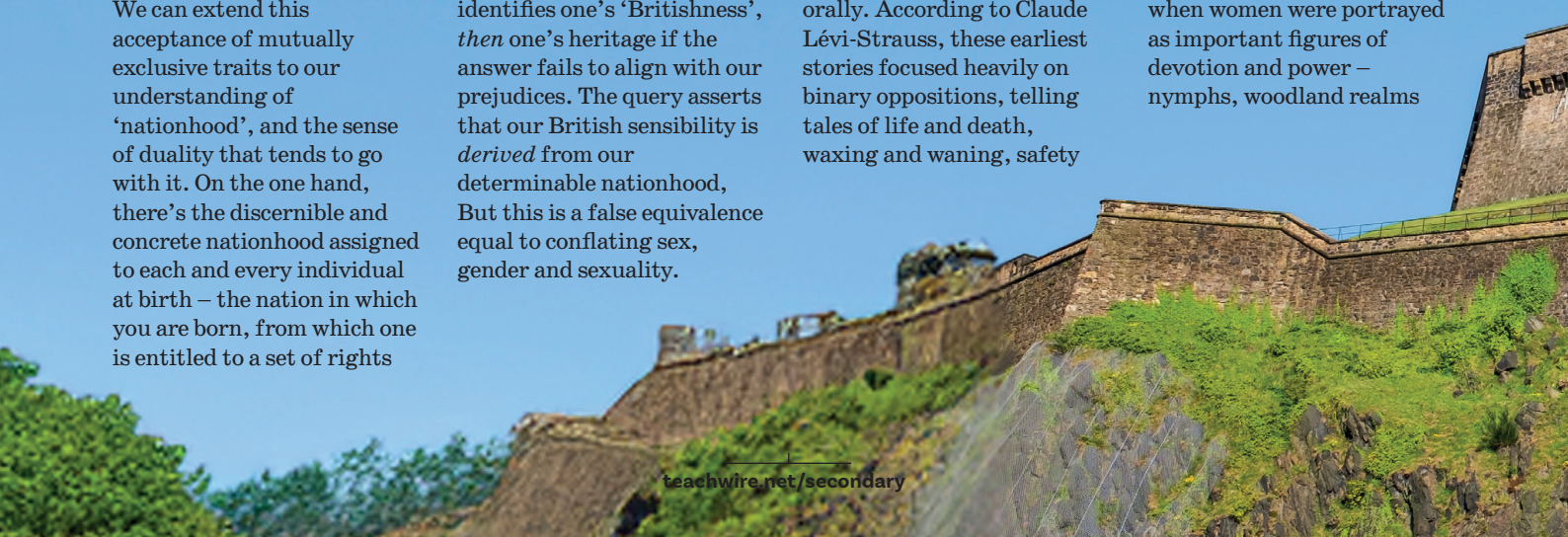
The first stories to be told in Britain were done so orally. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, these earliest stories focused heavily on binary oppositions, telling tales of life and death, waxing and waning, safety and danger. This emphasis on the basic premise of survival was important, since early society was in perpetual danger from the threats of the natural world.

Stories were therefore short, and usreually recounted poetically through deployment of techniques such as rhyme, metre and alliteration that continue to characterise the form of poetry to the present day. This 'prosody' would also take the form of a mnemonic or aide memoir, though, so that the learning of survival skills and knowledge could be passed down the generations.

Prescribed and enforced

Once longer stories began to be recorded, we started to see new layers added to these binary oppositions, resulting in tales of warriors, journeys and battles, songs of valour, and accounts of regional kings. The most famous example of this is the 8th century text *Beowulf*, the titular character of which kills the Grendel and returns home to rule his own people.

Beowulf and other stories of the time emerged from an era of riddles, monsters, and pagan ritual. It was a time when women were portrayed as important figures of devotion and power – nymphs, woodland realms



and spirits to be worshipped. These stories were deeply influenced by the Danes, Nords, Angles and Jutes.

Later, in the Premodern era, warriors became knights. Fights were now not simply fought in order to destroy evil, but to protect and rescue. Knights were chivalrous – defenders of the realm, yes, but also poetic and sportsmanlike. Many of them probably also played the lute.

Premodern stories increasingly revolved around themes of devotion, and of pledging loyalty to a Christian God. Literature was strictly regulated, such that any deviation from loyalty to the Church and Crown was severely punished. In turn, Christianity itself was tightly prescribed and enforced, with acts of subversion potentially punishable by execution. Just ask William Tyndale, who once tried printing a then-heretical 'English Bible'.

Popular power

Worship, however, was also an act of computus, in which monks calculated dates, calendar events, crop plantation and yield. Worship could thus be seen as a deep, 'scientific' study reliant on tables and maths, though it remained the case that texts of law and rule were written in Norman French, whilst Religious texts were largely recorded in Latin. The publication of state-sanctioned English bibles had to wait until Henry VIII sanctioned The Great Bible in 1539.

Looking back, the Modern era can be characterised by a long and gradual challenge to the dominance of the church. The emblematic moment of this period is arguably the founding of The Royal Society in 1660, under the motto *Nullius In Verba* – '*I am not bound to sweat by the words of any master*' / '*on no one's words*'.

From this point on, the 'truth makers' no longer had the credibility to make their claims on the basis of trust alone. That motto could almost be seen as a direct challenge to St Augustine's *Credo ut Intelligam* — '*I believe so that I may understand*'. This was the era in which old cultural monoliths such as the Church fell into sharp decline and were replaced by regional, popular power. Stories of this time soon became more concerned with emotional growth, unheard voices and themes of empowerment, as seen in landmark 19th century texts such as *Frankenstein, On the Origin of Species* and *Jane Eyre*.

The postmodern era came into being around the late 20th century, and was characterised by a weariness at struggles over power and governance. Following two world wars, a series of market crashes and the first stirrings of what seemed to be a new form of 'digital serfdom', there was a general nagging feeling of disillusion and disorientation – which is the place where we still find ourselves now.

Identity crisis

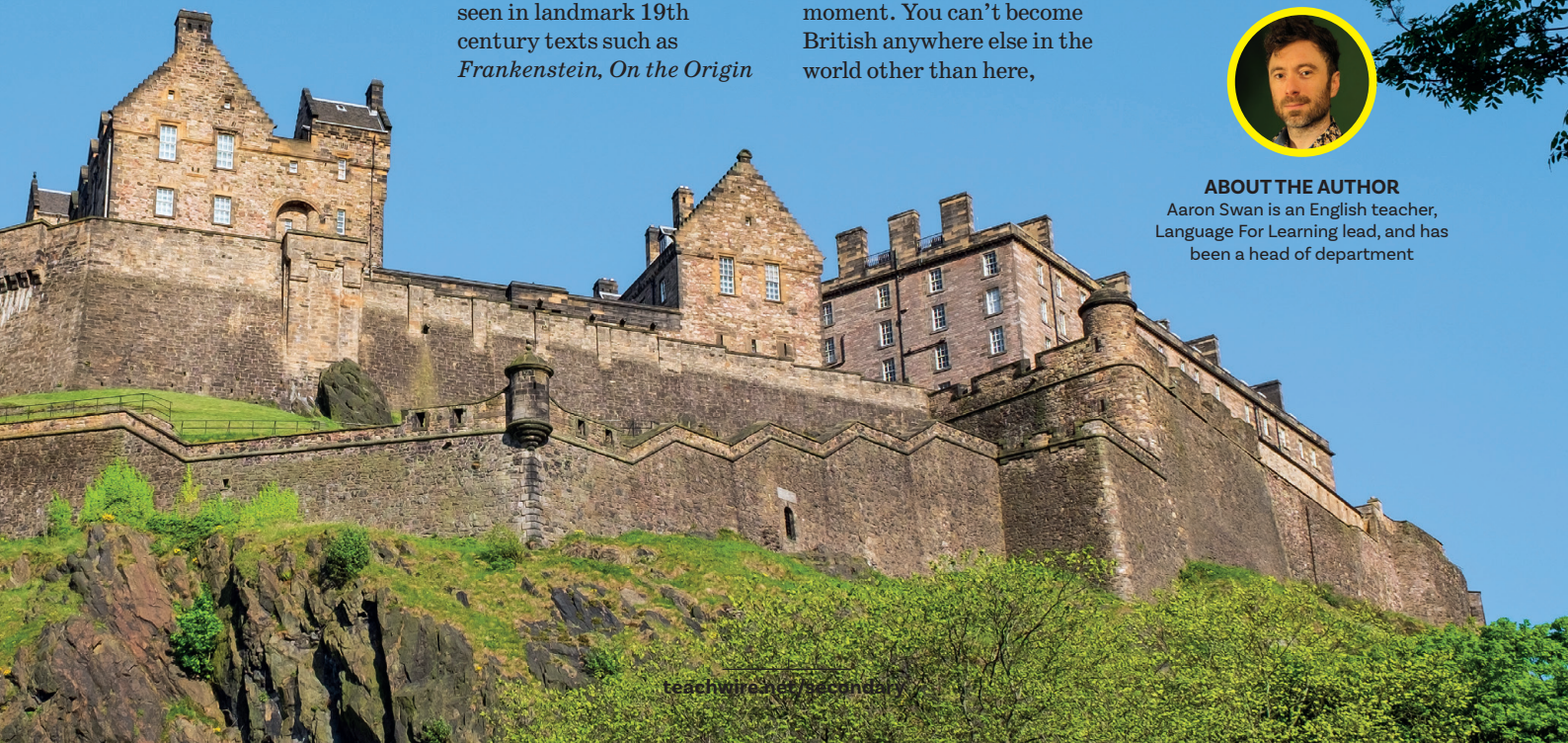
'Britishness' contains within it no certainty of identity. Instead, it's spent the last few years on the verge of an identity *crisis*, wary of doctrine and at risk of falling into the kind of nihilistic tribalism memorably explored in the likes of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and J.G. Ballard's *Crash*.

T.S. Eliot told us that the past is never superseded. Bakhtin told us that texts contain multiple histories. Foucault told us that discourses accumulate, but never vanish. Culture, just like literature, is a stratification of all stories – some 2,000 years of ingredients irrevocably baked in and cultivated into memory by living in Britain over a lifetime, not a moment. You can't become British anywhere else in the world other than here, amongst the stories.

A politics that defines Britishness as objective, as something regulated by power, inherited by birthright or awarded by state document is one which rejects idea that Britishness is also cultivated.

An individual's sensibility is a layered story that's nurtured over time, in good soil by tender hands, so that it infuses their character. 'Britishness' is perhaps best understood as a history of valour, chivalry and romance, with some capacity for godly and empirical worship, while also retaining a scepticism of authority and amplifying the voices of the quiet and oppressed.

Britishness thus contains within it two identities, but confirmation of one doesn't amount to confirmation of the other. A person needn't hold a British birth certificate to exhibit this culture; they just need to live here long enough.



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A question of trusts

It turns out the government is taking another crack at academisation for all schools – only this time, they plan to go about it quietly...

Isobel (not her real name) wasn't a bad teacher. In fact, she was pretty good – but she was an awful HOD.

It wasn't obvious, at first. After a year of disappointing results, however, it soon became clear that her unwillingness to observe staff, persistent avoidance of difficult conversations and worrying lack of curriculum knowledge were starting to take their toll.

Smoothing over the cracks

Fortunately – or so we were told, at least – we weren't just a school. We were part of a *multi-academy trust*, with a whole wealth of expertise and support supposedly available to us.

That's why, instead of us confronting the problem directly, the trust stepped in. They sent an 'expert' to guide and support Isobel; to smooth over the cracks and reassure everyone that improvement was on the way. Trouble was, the trust itself had struggled to improve several of its own schools. In effect, the blind were leading the blind.

Isobel is still at the school today, and I'm told that her results remain stubbornly unimproved.

Stories like this rarely feature in government White Papers, but they raise an important question. If the government wants every school to join a trust, how confident should we be that trusts actually improve schools?

Softly-softly approach

That question has become newly relevant following the publication of the Schools White Paper earlier this

month (see tinyurl.com/ts153-IT1), buried within which is a line that's attracted surprisingly little attention, stating the government's intention to move "*To all schools being part of school trusts.*"

At first glance, this wording sounds relatively benign – an aspiration, rather than a mandate. Yet the implication is clear. In the long term, the government still envisages a system in which every school sits within a trust structure.

This marks something of a shift. For much of the past decade, the expansion of academies relied heavily on compulsion, with schools rated as Inadequate usually forced to convert.

That strategy generated fierce debate and considerable resistance from the education sector at the time. In contrast, the White Paper's language is markedly softer, perhaps to try and emphasise the notions of collaboration, partnership and 'community-rooted' trusts. LAs may now even establish trusts themselves – a notable change after years that saw councils steadily stripped of their previously significant roles in school improvement.

Similar destination

For all the change in rhetoric, though, the end destination seems remarkably similar. If the government's ambitions are realised, the model of traditional, standalone maintained schools accountable directly to LAs may gradually disappear.

Supporters of the trust model argue that it lets schools collaborate more effectively through shared expertise, centralised resources and common professional development, and to an extent, that's true.

A Sutton Trust study of 39 academy chains, however, found that only seven significantly outperformed the national average for disadvantaged pupils, while eight performed worse. Outcomes, it seems, can vary enormously between trusts.

Neither do there seem to be any clear structural advantages compared to maintained schools. Analysis of Ofsted ratings has found that 93% of council-maintained schools are rated Good or Outstanding, compared with 87% of academies.

The evidence suggests that governance structures alone don't improve schools. Anyone working in education knows that progress instead depends far more on the quality of teaching, stability of staff teams and availability of resources.

A certain weariness

All this may explain why structural reform often generates a certain weariness among teachers. Over the past decade, schools have navigated academy conversions, the rapid growth of MATs and multiple changes to oversight systems, yet the challenges facing schools remain stubbornly unchanged – teacher shortages, rising pupil needs and growing pressures on budgets.

If the government truly intends to move towards a fully trust-based system, it would be better for them to say so openly, and clearly explain how doing so will address the problems teachers face every day. Because if every school is eventually expected to join a trust, teachers will want to know that those trusts can actually deliver the improvement they promise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

Verification REQUIRED?

Dai Durbridge sets out his reasons for why a social media ban for the under 16s won't work, and what a better approach to tackling online harms might look like...

Didn't prohibition teach us anything? When the United States banned alcohol in 1920, the architects of that experiment were convinced they were doing the right thing. Consumption would fall. Society would be safer. And for a brief moment, it was.

But then people found ways around it – speakeasies, bootleggers, home-brewed bathtub gin – and alcohol consumption rebounded, except now wrapped in the added glamour of the forbidden.

The lesson was stark. Once people have already tasted something, banning it rarely makes them stop. It just makes them more determined and more creative in how they continue to obtain it.

'Huge demand'

I've been thinking about this lesson a great deal recently, as the UK government continues to explore the viability of introducing an Australia-style ban on social media use for under-16s.

On 9th March 2026, MPs rejected a Lords-backed amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that would have included such a ban. However, the government had only launched a consultation into this a week earlier – which at the time of writing is set to run until 26th May – with the result that this rejection merely kicks the can down the road.

Indeed, Lord Nash, who proposed the amendment, has vowed to try to have it passed again, citing "*Huge demand across the country to raise the age limit and protect children*". It's worth asking, though, whether a ban would actually work – and what the consequences for schools might be if it doesn't.

The horse has bolted

Let's take a moment to consider the Online Safety Act 2023. Passed with considerable fanfare, and gradually implemented over the course of the past year, it was originally intended to make the internet safer for children. And yet, almost as soon as its age verification provisions came into force in July 2025, reports began to emerge of young people using virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent them. In effect, they were continuing to access the same content as before, only now with a slightly greater sense of technical achievement.

Early education minister Olivia Bailey has proposed an alternative framework, which would include giving the Technology Secretary powers to 'restrict or limit children's VPN use' – a tacit acknowledgement that such workarounds are already well-established. Social media use in the 2020s may be taking place in a completely different world to that inhabited by alcohol consumers in the 1920s, of course, but the parallel holds.

We're talking here about platforms that are so deeply woven into the daily lives of children and teenagers that a sweeping access ban would be like closing a door previously left wide open to them for potentially their entire lives.

Instagram launched in 2010. TikTok first went global around 2018. The young people now in secondary school have, in many cases, grown up with these platforms as a constant hum in the background of their social lives, as natural and unremarkable as texting would once have seemed to their parents.

Implications for schools

Any teenager determined to get round a social media ban wouldn't find it especially difficult. VPNs are freely available and often simple to use. Older siblings, cousins and friends are often willing to lend an account. Fake ages and edited images have already been used to bypass age verification systems.

> **"Young people have grown up with these platforms as a constant hum in the background of their social lives"**

These mechanisms of circumvention aren't all that exotic, or even technica, being well within the reach of most secondary school pupils. And just as prohibition didn't stop Americans drinking, a blanket ban on social media won't stop teenagers scrolling.

None of this should be seen as merely an abstract policy concern. The knock-on effects of a social media ban within schools would be significant, and not always immediately obvious.

Shadow education secretary Laura Trott told the Commons that polling suggests 40% of children view explicit content on smartphones during the school day. That's a striking statistic that speaks to a real and present problem, but a ban wouldn't provide a solution – it would simply change its texture. Those pupils who continue to access social media illicitly would simply do so more covertly.

The content itself wouldn't disappear. It would just be shared in quieter corners, in toilet blocks, through whispered conversations during break times. Schools already working hard to manage online harms would soon find themselves having to manage a complex underground economy built around social medoia access.

Social division

Then there's the question of social division. In practice, bans of the sort being proposed are never uniformly applied. Even the NSPCC, with its child protection remit, has warned that a blanket ban could drive young people to darker corners of the internet that they're even less equipped to navigate safely.

In a school context, this would create a troubling bifurcation between those students who comply with the ban and those who don't. This division would likely follow existing faultlines relating to parental oversight, socioeconomic privilege and/or peer group dynamics, resulting in a new form of social stratification that play out daily in the classroom and the corridor.

Also, there's not just the question of what we'd

prevent, but what would be lost. For the most vulnerable students – those who are isolated, who are questioning their identity, or who come from difficult home environments – social media can often be a lifeline connecting them to peer support communities, creative outlets and other helpful resources that might not be available to them otherwise.

A blanket ban can't distinguish between the teenager who's spending three hours each evening watching algorithmically curated outrage and the teenager just discovering a community of like-minded people who understand what they're going through. It simply removes both.

In the event of a genuinely enforced ban, the sudden withdrawal of that support could affect pupils' wellbeing in ways that manifest at school in unpredictable, and potentially serious ways. Not to mention the cliff-edge scenario when in which a person turns 16 and is instantly able to sign up to social media platforms without possessing the tools to navigate them.

Smarter harm reduction

The aforementioned government consultation will examine whether social media platforms should come up with a minimum age requirement, and whether platforms should switch off especially addictive features, such as autoplay. These are more targeted interventions that point in a more productive direction.

Working with technology firms to develop more age-appropriate versions of their platforms – with more addictive features stripped out, algorithmic recommendation systems restricted and robust safeguarding built in by design – would address the harm, rather than the access. It's similar to the difference between making a road safer and banning people from using it altogether.

Education has a critical role to play, too. Schools already do a great deal on online safety, but if the alternative to a ban is education, then this needs to be more than a once-a-year PSHE lesson.

Young people need genuine *digital literacy* – the capacity to recognise manipulative design, an understanding of how algorithms work, the ability to spot when they're being targeted and knowledge of where to seek help. That said, schools can't just be handed responsibility for solving a problem created by billion-dollar platforms without being given the tools to do so.

Prohibition failed because it tried to eliminate something people already had. The social media debate should heed that important lesson by not abandoning the goal of protecting young people online, but to rather pursue that goal through means that will *actually work*.

For schools, that will mean investing in education, engaging with platforms and having honest conversations with pupils about the online world as it is – not as we might wish it to be. The horse has bolted. The question now is not whether we can put it back in the stable, but how to ensure that the journey ahead is a safe one.

THE REAL CONCERN – RECRUITMENT CHECKS

Draft updates to the Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSiE) statutory guidance risk undermining one of the most effective safeguarding tools schools have.

A proposed revision to paragraph 292 suggests that schools should conduct online checks on shortlisted candidates via an 'online search engine', marking a significant step back from the existing duty to conduct a broader 'online search'.

Typing a candidate's name into Google isn't a safeguarding check. It returns hundreds of thousands of results, with no way of identifying whether any relate to the individual in question. Moreover, the evidence of misconduct that actually matters – often involving posts on X, Facebook and Instagram – simply won't surface that way.

Between February 2024 and February 2026, the online monitoring service Social Media Check produced over 29,000 reports for schools, uncovering in the process more than 1,300 instances of hate speech, and 35 expressions of extremist views.

At a time when the DfE should be strengthening its guidance on safer recruitment, it seems to be

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dai Durbridge is partner and head of safeguarding at the UK and Ireland law firm Browne Jacobson; for more information, visit brownejacobson.com

HEARING ALL SIDES

Emma Slade Edmondson, author of a new book for children and teens about the experience of growing up with mixed heritage, reflects on how views of the mixed experience have changed, and the progress yet to be made...

In 2020 I launched a podcast called Mixed Up, all about the mixed race experience – the challenges, the joys – which I continue to produce and co-host with the writer Nicole Ocran.

We've interviewed hundreds of people in the years since, including celebrities, historians, psychologists, actors and sportsmen/sportswomen. Often, we've been told by interviewees that nobody has ever talked to them about that part of their life before, despite their mixed heritage having been a big part of their identity.

Hearing other people's stories has felt a little like therapy at times, and also helped uncover a lot of things I didn't realise had actually affected me deeply while I was growing up myself. Having those conversations has helped me realise that I wasn't alone in what I'd experienced; that there can be a lot of unity in the experiences mixed race people have had, as well as a lot of difference.

'Racial justification'

I grew up in a predominantly white environment. My parents are both white, as are my brothers. I was always expecting to be questioned and challenged over my identity and who I was, constantly waiting for people to, as I understand it now, seek 'racial justification' from me – a phrase I learnt when Nicole and I wrote our book *The Half of It*.

You can feel like you're being endlessly interrogated on who you are, and your claims to being one side of your heritage or the other. As formative experiences go, that can be quite challenging, especially if you don't have any outlets through which to talk about it.

I remember being questioned on who was from when I was very small, quite often by adults. I went to a multicultural primary school, where perhaps it didn't happen as much it might have elsewhere – but even then, I still vividly remember being told I was '*half caste*' in the playground and taking that home to my mum, not understanding what it meant.

> **"When I was growing up, people just didn't talk about this stuff"**

Because when I was growing up, people just didn't talk about this stuff. My parents never talked about it, it never came up at school. It's as though people lacked the language, knowledge or understanding to navigate the kind of conversations that needed to be had.

Regressive messaging

If you'd asked me several years ago whether the experiences of young mixed people now were better, or at least different from mine when I was growing up, I might have given a cautiously positive answer. It felt like there was a moment when anti-racism education and appreciation for other cultures was actually growing.

What we're seeing at the moment is a railing against that sense of multiculturalism and acceptance. It feels like we're regressing. The media has played a part in that, by feeding some really ugly stuff which then trickles down into people's lived realities, in ways that I can palpably feel as a person of colour. I know that my friends, family and other members of my community feel the same.

What worries me is the effect that this regressive messaging is having on children and young people, who often won't have had the time to develop the coping mechanisms needed to filter that stuff out. The likelihood is that it will have a much deeper effect on them.

Harmful misconceptions

I distinctly remember a conversation I once had with a male friend when I was around 14, who was telling me how great it was that I was 'pretty cool' and not 'crazy'. I asked him what he meant by that, and he said that mixed-race girls are '*Usually pretty crazy, because they're confused about who they are.*'

I only came to understand what was actually happening in that conversation in my early 30s. I realised that he'd unknowingly, yet fully imbibed the 'tragic mulatto' myth, which holds that mixed race girls are so at odds with themselves, so confused by being half of one thing and half of another that they're always 'in pain' with themselves in some way – a trope deeply embedded in historical racism.

I know from speaking to people now that this kind of thing is still very much happening to mixed race girls and women – who remain, unfortunately, the most represented group in assault and rape statistics, at the same time that we've seen a recent rise in levels of misogyny.

We have to remember that these things are all interconnected and intersectional. To teach and protect our young people, we need to stay abreast of precisely how things intersect and impact upon what's happening in young people's lives, so that they don't inadvertently perpetuate harmful misconceptions and beliefs.

Agency and space

In schools, there can be a lack of understanding around how people can sometimes be of dual, or even multiple heritage, and therefore feel aligned with more than one group, yet be perceived by their peers – and sometimes even adults – as somehow deceitful, insincere or inauthentic. When you're a young person already grappling with your identity, trying to feel authentic within yourself

and confident with putting yourself out into the world, that can feel particularly hard.

Young people can lack the confidence to push back when they're challenged on questions of their identity, but that's their prerogative. They should always have the agency and space to do that, which is something that teachers and community leaders perhaps need to be more aware of.

I also think there's still this prevalent assumption that 'being mixed' equates to being 'mixed black and white', which is obviously ridiculous, given the huge spectrum of mixed identities. Linked to that, though, is the way that being mixed can sometimes be synonymous with having 'white privilege'.

Through anti-racism education and general awareness raising that's become a much more widely understood term, but being mixed and having white privilege are very much *not* the same thing. That matters, because there can be times when young people feel unable to challenge racism or prejudice they've faced, because the message they're given is '*You're privileged, so why is there something wrong? You should be fine.*'

Don't assume – ask

There's certainly some education still be done around these areas, as well as the 'racial justification' that mixed people still frequently confront. Something that regularly comes up in many of the interviews I've done is that they've encountered people who feel this need to put others in a box, sort them out and tell them who they are.

That's why it's important that people in positions of leadership, caregiving and protection in schools start from a place of not assuming, but *asking*, and modelling that same example for other young people – giving room for young mixed people to engage in self-identification and self-exploration, while remembering that mixed young people can and should have the agency to tell you who they are.

What gives me hope now is the literature, podcasts and other media and communities that have emerged in the last few years that are actually addressing these kinds of issues and opening up conversations that weren't being had before.

It feels to me like there used to be a form of self-censorship; a reticence, or even sense of shame in talking about being mixed. As such, the experiences of mixed people were too often reduced to a kind of non-existence, simply because there was nowhere for them to be shared. It wasn't perceived as an experience warranting its own dialogue, but I think that's changed.

When I see children and parents coming to my book events, and hear from the adults how excited they are, because there was nothing comparable for them when they were growing up, that fills me with joy. I'm happy that children and young people are now getting access to kinds of resources I never had myself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Emma Slade Edmondson is a writer, co-presenter of the Mixed Up podcast and head of the marketing strategy and communications firm, ESE Consultancy; her new book, *Mixed: Explore and Celebrate Your Mixed Identity* (£9.99, Pan Macmillan) is aimed at 9- to 13-year-olds and is available now

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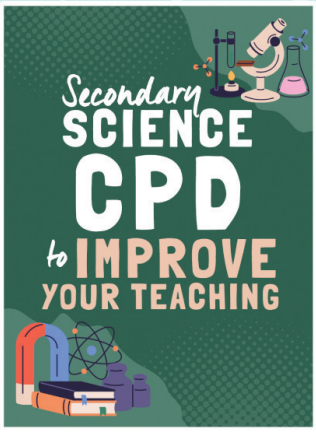

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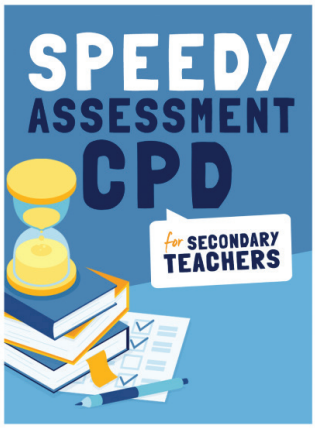

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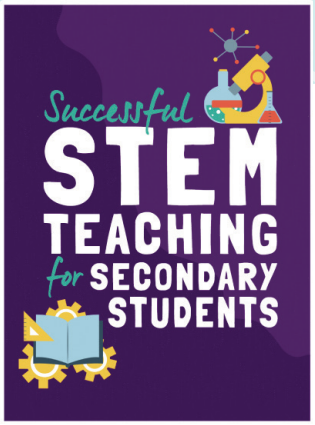

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FOCUS ON: PHYSICAL EDUCATION

We examine the importance of taking team tactics seriously, how the FA is helping schools tackle barriers to participation within women's football – and what every secondary student stands to gain from studying dance...

How can we ensure that all students get to access a sport and passion within PE that's meaningful to them?

THE AGENDA:

TALKING TACTICS

Adam Chrostowski makes the case for why PE lessons should include space for thinking about how the right strategies and tactics can make a crucial difference to the final score

Technical ability and teamwork play a huge role in sport performance, but they don't always guarantee success. Children's eagerness to understand and implement tactics from a young age is often overlooked, however, with the emphasis in PE lessons usually concentrated on the physical focus of competing and performing in sport.

It's important that we try to implement both aspects into lessons – firstly to help students perform better, but also so that they can understand a given sport more holistically.

Tactical benefits

As well as helping students improve their understanding of different sports, spending lesson time on developing tactical knowledge will also make your lessons more accessible, allowing students who might not be as strong on the practical side to succeed and exert a positive influence on a team's performance.

It might follow that a more holistic approach to assessing students' PE outcomes would see attention paid to their tactical input, decision-making skills during games or post-match analysis of their team's performance.

This stronger knowledge and understanding of tactics could, of course, be transferred across a range of different sports. Some tactics that students learn about for, say, rugby can be similarly applied to other 'invasion games' such as football, netball or hockey. Learning why it's advantageous to move opponents around the court in a game of badminton gives you knowledge of a principle that can deployed to similar ends in tennis or table tennis.

Another good example is fielding in traditional striking and fielding sports. Looking carefully at how different teams set up when they're the fielding side in cricket will provide your students with a great opportunity for analysis and discussion on the fundamental principles at play, and how they could also be applied to related games, such as rounders.

> **"Children's eagerness to understand and implement tactics from a young age is often overlooked"**

Small-sided games

One method I've used to start discussions around tactics in PE lessons is to organise small-sided games where the teacher is able to adjust the number of players on each side, alter the size/shape of the playable area or modify rules at a moment's notice.

This could be as simple as setting up a game of football in a smaller area with fewer players, or setting up a batting game based on rounders, except with fewer fielders, while giving the batter increased time to analyse the space they have available, and how they should adjust their shot to best gain an advantage.

I'd often begin a lesson with these smaller-sided games, so that students could gain an understanding of a tactic I wanted them to implement. Afterwards, I'd bring the students together for a discussion of how they sought to apply the tactic and what effect they felt it had on the game, before then setting the same drill again, only with a larger number of players this time. Can they still apply the same principles, and will they still work in a busier setting?

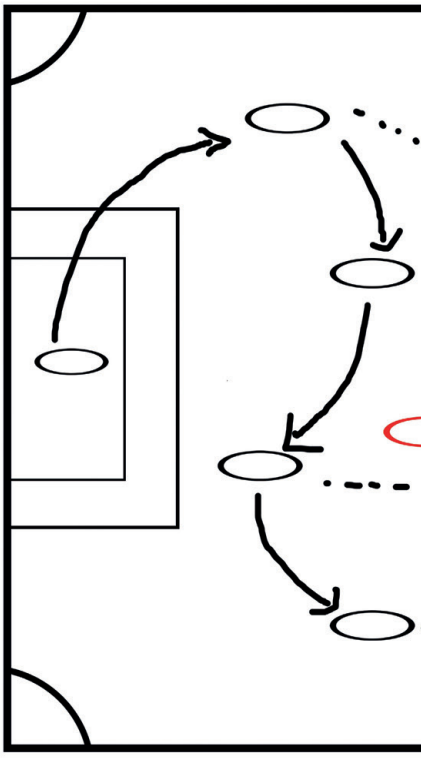
This use of smaller-sided games lets students practice specific tactics in a low stakes environment where there's generally less pressure, due to the number of participating players, before later putting them to the test in larger games involving more of their peers. Another benefit of smaller-sided games is that they can support the development of students' technical skills, depending on what you want the drill to achieve – whether that's ensuring all players get more contact with the ball by shrinking the pitch size, or making it larger so that they can hone their abilities at finding space and marking opposing players.

Over to the analysts

Another method I'll often use during the 'conditioned game' aspect of a PE lesson is to have non-player students analyse a game and provide some feedback to those who were taking part. This will not only keep students who weren't playing involved and active within the lesson, but can also gives them a meaningful role of *observing*.

These students tasked with observing could be designated as 'the analysts', thus sparking a class discussion around what an analyst actually is, potentially supported with reference to related audio or visual media and signposting to careers information.

Once the game has finished, bring the groups together and first let those students who were actively playing discuss their performance and their



feelings about it. Then let 'the analysts' review and provide feedback from their point of view.

Where possible, I try to encourage the analysts to suggest two specific things that the team or certain individuals successfully accomplished from a tactical point of view, before suggesting something else they might want to implement for next time. I'm always careful to emphasise that these suggestions should be focused on *tactics only,* and that we're not looking to critique anyone's level of skill.

Some examples of appropriate feedback could include, '*I enjoyed the way you used man-marking in order to increase the pressure on the opposition*' or '*I thought the way you altered your delivery of bowling to the batter was excellent, as it kept the batter guessing as to which type of shot they needed to use.*'

'Yes, coach!'

This could then give way to an opportunity for assessing students via new and different, yet still important aspects of sport, such as their own skills of analysis or leadership abilities, on the basis of peer feedback.

Students who are injured or otherwise unable to participate in a PE lesson should still be able to feel involved and have a role to play within the lesson. A further way of promoting the use of tactics within lessons could be to appoint such students as a team's 'coach' or 'captain' (assuming the reasons for their non-participation make this possible). Their primary role will be to observe the game and periodically ask the teacher to briefly pause the lesson or game at any time, so that they can provide some feedback to their team on what's going well and what needs to improve.

With the aid of mini whiteboards and/or notebooks, these non-playing students can still contribute to the lesson. Writing something down naturally encourages students to think a little more deeply about what advice they'd like to give their classmates – a strategy that can often work well with quieter students, who might otherwise lack the confidence to give such feedback publicly.

By giving these students deliberate opportunities to speak, they can experience an increased sense of importance and work on their leadership skills to a degree. If you don't happen to have any non-participants within the lesson, you could try implementing the same strategy by rotating students out of the game and have them temporarily assume the 'coach' role. One benefit of this is that students can get to experience the same game from two very different perspectives – observing versus playing – and try acting on their own observations, thoughts and feedback as coach when they step back on to the pitch as a player.

The 'half time plenary'

A final method I've previously used for getting students to think about tactics is to give one minute to an opposing side that they can use as a 'half time plenary' for feeding back to the other team. After all, they're the ones who have been on the receiving end of the tactics that have been implemented – so what are their thoughts on the tactics their opponents have been using? How effective have they been?

You can also try encouraging the presenting team to identify any areas of weakness regarding their own performance, and fostering instant feedback in the moment – thus ensuring that all students benefit from reflecting on the tactics used in the lesson thus far.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Adam Chrostowski is a secondary PE teacher in the North East, with experience leading sports programmes across both primary and secondary settings

Q&A

"A calmer environment for learning"

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Breaking barriers

We hear how the FA plans to help schools tackle the factors preventing girls from pursuing an interest in playing football

Sue Day is Director of Women's and Para Football at the FA – a position she's held since 2024, having previously captained the England rugby team and been a founding trustee of the Women's Sports Trust. She was awarded an MBE for services to gender equality in sport in 2020.

What are your general thoughts on how accessible football currently is for girls?

When I was growing up, there were many girls who would never have seen football as a place for them. That's where big campaigns and events come in – things like having the Euros here in 2022, and girls being able to see those wonderful athletes playing the game, and then thinking, '*This is something I could be part of*' – that makes a big difference.

Then there are obviously the increased opportunities for girls to play football at school, which have come about through a combination of teachers wanting to make a space for it and assembling the nuts and bolts of the infrastructure needed to make those opportunities available.

What can you tell us about the FA's 'Made for This Game: Breaking Barriers' campaign and its main objectives?

We've seen how there are now lots of opportunities for girls to play football in schools, but girls aren't necessarily taking those opportunities up. This campaign draws on work we've undertaken in conjunction with Barclays to identify the 'blockers', by conducting a study among teachers and getting their insights, because they're best placed to know what their students are thinking.

In primary schools, teachers told us that the main thing stopping girls wanting to play was hearing boys say '*Girls don't play football.*' At secondary school, the obstacles are more internalised, often related to self-consciousness, a lack of confidence in their own bodies and worries over what other people are going to think.

Having gained some understanding of what's blocking them, we then wanted to work out what we could do about it, and support teachers and schools in taking action.

Did you see signs of those sexist attitudes at secondary as well, in addition to those more internalised barriers?

Absolutely. We all know that sadly, there are rising levels of misogyny in society, so we shouldn't be surprised when we see such attitudes and sentiments coming through in school sports. What we're trying to do is find ways of counteracting those, and helping girls see the wonderful opportunities that can come from playing football, the joy they can get from it and the wonderful space it can create.

So often, when society is telling you to be 'smaller' and 'quieter', what team sports can do is provide this space where you're getting the opposite message. You can be strong, you can be athletic, you can be loud and you can be a leader. It can be so powerful for girls during their formative years to know that there's another way they can be, in this space that's beautiful and joyous, and where they're allowed to inhabit their whole selves.

With the survey, did you also canvas the views of girls already engaged in playing football, be it at their school or even semi-professionally?

Yes, we wanted to listen to girls who have had a wonderful time in football, as well as those who perhaps haven't. What we heard is that girls want a space they can feel comfortable in – but what's interesting is that will mean something to different to different girls.

For some, it's really simple stuff like the kit they're required to wear – traditional PE kits they don't feel very comfortable in, for example, when they'd much rather be wearing something bigger or baggier. For others, it can come down to not wanting to play in the same locations as boys. It's ultimately about trying to create spaces in which girls can feel comfortable, rather than compromised.

What steps or support would you like to see schools engage in?

I'm not an educator, but I'd suggest listening to girls and understanding what it is that they actually want. With co-ed PE lessons, for instance, there may be lots of girls who will feel perfectly confident running around playing football with the boys, while others will find that really off-putting.

Try to understand the kind of situation that will help them feel comfortable playing – which, past a certain age, often won't be co-ed groups – and create a space that works for them.

A set of KS3/4 resources to accompany the campaign, including an activity worksheet, PowerPoint presentation, Teacher Guide and visual podcast, can be downloaded from girlsfootballinschools.org

ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

Alexander Campbell tells us why secondary students can benefit from dance lessons, and how the Royal Academy of Dance can help provide them

Alexander Campbell is currently the Royal Academy of Dance's Artistic Director, Education & Participation. He began his professional dance career training at Academy Ballet, Sydney, before relocating to the UK and joining The Royal Ballet School. He later became first soloist at Birmingham Royal Ballet, and was Principal of The Royal Ballet from 2016 until 2024.

Can you tell us more about type of work that the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) undertakes with secondary schools?
A number of our registered teachers provide classes within secondary school settings, but the main work we do is through our 'Step into Dance' programme, which can introduce secondary school students to not just ballet, but many different styles of dance.

In some cases, if there's a group of students who have experienced dance and wish to pursue it further, but are unable to access enough provision through their school, the programme will enable them to continue engaging with dance in some way. Last year, we were in over a hundred schools, providing support that was being accessed by some 4,000 young people.

From what you've been able to observe through that work, and in discussions with RAD teachers and learners, what are your thoughts on the level of dance provision currently available in secondary schools?
We can see that there's a real interest, sense of drive and desire to engage with dance from young people. Dance has become much more visible in popular culture in recent years – most obviously through shows like *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent*, but there's also more general awareness and a greater acceptance that dance is something anyone could potentially enjoy.

On the flipside, however, we've also been hearing about declines in both the availability and standards of dance provision within secondary schools. It can be the case that classes aren't being run at all, or that a 'dance' element is being packaged in alongside the teaching of other disciplines, compounded by a lack of specialist teachers able to actually deliver dance classes.

That's why we, like many other dance organisations, were relieved to hear the discussions around the government's Curriculum and Assessment Review, the final report of which highlighted the importance of performing arts, with an explicit reference to dance, which was *so* good. Just seeing the words 'choreography' and other dance-specific terms being referenced – there seemed to be this recognition that dance education isn't just about teaching someone how to it, but also about how to better understand and appreciate it.

Can you see RAD playing more of a role in addressing those issues – particularly the lack of specialist dance training among teachers?
The teacher training programmes we offer support a range of specialist teachers, who can then enter secondary settings as external providers and start making a difference. Any kind of dance provision within secondary schools is a positive, but when delivered by a specialist provider, it will always be even better.

That said, while we can provide the teachers, it's less clear whether the students at a school will have the ability to engage with those teachers at the level we'd like.

> **"There's been real positive shift where perceptions and attitudes around dance are concerned"**

What are some of the main benefits that dance can provide for students?
Based on the statistics we've gathered from our Step Into Dance programme, the majority of students who have engaged with it reported feeling more confident afterwards and appeared to show more resilience. They didn't just feel better physically, but better *within themselves* – which is a brilliant thing we should be doing more to highlight.

The other thing about dance is that you can experience the kind of physical exertion and opportunities to work on your co-ordination, spatial awareness and teamwork skills you get from team sports, but in a non-competitive environment.

Team sports naturally lean towards win/lose scenarios. They can be presented in different ways, and you could even teach some of skills involved in non-competitive ways, but team sports aren't necessarily for everyone. With dance, there are opportunities to put yourself into it so that it becomes a form of self-expression that's distinct from other school subjects.

So what do you see as being the main obstacles that prevent schools from teaching dance more widely?
Lack of resources is the main issue. Trying something new, and committing time and investment to it can be difficult, and something that schools and PE departments aren't always comfortable with doing.

Taster sessions, like the one-day experiences we offer within the Step Into Dance programme, can help to introduce students to a certain style of dance with no ongoing commitment. If the session goes well, great – there might then be more incentive for the school to look at ways of making more dance provision available. If the session is less successful, the school won't be on the hook for any future fees.

In terms of how we're seen at the RAD, I feel that many people think, '*Oh, that's just ballet,*' and assume they'll need ballet shoes for our one-off sessions. In actual fact, the practitioners we engage specialise in many different forms of dance – from jazz, to contemporary to hip-hop – with the latter proving to be a particular popular choice among students.

I've been a ballet dancer since the age of 5. I loved it,

and went on to have a professional career, but being in this role – where I'm learning about different dance styles, and how the origins of, say, hip-hop dance lie in non-violent conflict resolution – has proven to be really interesting. We've subsequently seen how, in certain settings, all-male groups can greatly appreciate the freedom that dance gives them to express themselves in entirely new, different and positive ways.

Have you or your colleagues found yourselves needing to push back against certain cultural stereotypes when trying to communicate the benefits of dance to male school students?

Possibly, but I think there's been real positive shift where perceptions and attitudes around dance are concerned. I've certainly seen that from the people that we've been engaging with, at least.

The majority of those we work with still identify as female, but there are more boys getting involved now than I've ever seen before. People are seeing more boys and men engaging in dance, and becoming more aware that there's a whole spectrum of dance they can participate in.

Even if we think stereotypically of what it means to be 'masculine' – having the ability to move quickly, possessing physical strength – professional dancers are *ripped*. There's no way you could look at what these professional athletes are capable of and somehow conclude that what they do isn't 'masculine'.

Would giving students exposure to those different dance styles and showing them positive role models be something best accomplished via school visits?

For schools in London and Essex that are involved with the programme, school visits are certainly an option that's available to them. We have good numbers at the moment, but we're always trying to facilitate more such visits where we can.

Outside of that, many of our RAD teachers across the country perform similar work for us in their local contexts, so the ability and capacity to engage is there. I would, however, like for us to provide even more support for them, in a CPD sense. Our dance teachers are confident in how to teach, but things are changing rapidly with respect to working in classrooms and how to safely structure sessions. I believe our role there should be to ensure we're continuing to engage with and support them, through all this rapid evolution.

THE STEP FORWARD PROGRAMME

- Step Forward is the taster version of our Step Into Dance program. It consists of a workshop that can be delivered via two 90-minute sessions or single 3-hour session, during which an external dance practitioner will give students an introduction to their chosen style of dance.
- Typically, the focus of Step Into Dance sessions will be on hip-hop dance, though it's possible for schools to opt for jazz or contemporary, should they wish.
- Each session includes a brief overview outlining the history and context of the dance style the students are about to learn, followed by the teaching of some basic foundational skills.
- Students are then shown how to demonstrate their own creativity through creating a piece of their own by combining several of the foundational moves they've just been shown.

For more information, visit royalacademyofdance.org

Building technical RESILIENCE

When making a major edtech-related purchase, how can you be sure that the products or services in question will go the distance? Well, it can help to ask the right questions...

When educational technology falters, schools feel it immediately. "*Technology is meant to be an enabler,*" says Ian Tufts, chief technology officer for ParentPay Group. "*Slow performance or downtime distracts teachers from their core responsibility – teaching – and forces them into troubleshooting mode. School leaders may be taken away from leadership to support with manual processes and admin, and they don't have essential student data they can rely on.*"

These challenges can then be amplified by our modern consumer expectations for near-instant response. "*Our tolerance for delay is almost zero,*" Ian adds. "*Administrative tasks – like taking the register, or recording behaviour data – need to be seamless. If systems stall, staff lose time and focus, and safeguarding records can be put at risk.*"

So, what should IT leaders look for when selecting a supplier? Availability is key, but that should be seen as just the starting point.

"*Review performance over time,*" Ian advises. "*Look at a supplier's openness about incidents, their disaster recovery testing, and whether they hold independent accreditations, such as ISO 9001 for quality, ISO 27001 for security or PCI DSS for data processing.*"

Scaling to demand

Recovery planning matters just as much as day-to-day speed. "*Two questions cut through the jargon,*" Ian explains. "'*Recovery Point Objective' – how much data could be lost if a system fails? And 'Recovery Time Objective' – how long it would take to bring the service back? A daily backup might mean you lose 24 hours of data. We build in synchronous, real-time replication, so that if one data centre fails, another will instantly take over with minimal disruption.*"

Ian points to the invisible work carried out behind the scenes that's responsible for

EDTECH CHECKLIST

Specific edtech solutions and providers that can be relied on in the long term will tend to feature the following:

- Proven uptime and transparent incident reporting
- Independent accreditations (e.g. ISO 9001, ISO 27001, PCI DSS)
- Clearly stated Recovery Point and Recovery Time Objectives
- Evidence of regular load testing and auto-scaling
- Robust supply chain risk management

that reliability: "*We design for resilience from the outset,*" he says. "*Instead of one large server, we scale horizontally – adding many smaller 'nodes' so that the system can reroute if one fails. Auto-scaling in the cloud lets us meet unexpected spikes without wasting energy when demand is low.*"

That scaling is tested constantly. "*We run load tests using tools like Gatling and JMeter,*" Ian explains. "*We simulate thousands of teachers taking the morning register, or parents rushing to top up dinner money, ramping traffic up and down to find break points. Azure's Kubernetes technology then spins up extra computing power automatically when usage passes set thresholds. We know that every morning, more than 31,000 people will log on to take registers through our cloud version of SIMS – so it's vital that our systems are robust enough to cope with demand.*"

Sector-specific insight

These planning processes also have to take account of the school calendar. "*We know that September and January bring surges, as pupils return and parents set up payments,*" Ian says. "*Our engineering and support teams work round the clock, and are laser-focused on the early morning load from 7am, so that we're ready when logins begin and can ensure that there's no disruption to the school day.*"

"Catastrophic outages often come from a hidden supplier weakness"

That sector-specific insight is a key differentiator. "*You can buy cloud services anywhere,*" Ian notes, "*but understanding how schools operate – what time registers open, when exams are going to create extra load – means we can anticipate demand and fix issues faster.*"

Finally, Ian urges decision-makers to probe suppliers' contracts and supply chains. "*Some organisations run on a 'minimum viable' approach, and accept long outages because it's cheaper,*" Ian concedes. "*Building safe, reliable, scalable and performant systems is hard, and takes ongoing dedication and investment. We provide systems that can safely be relied on by tens of thousands of teachers, and also millions of school children's parents, so we need to be able to safely rely on our suppliers.*

"*Ask providers how they manage third-party risk, whether they operate across multiple independent processing sites, and how often they test failover. Catastrophic outages will often come from a hidden supplier weakness.*"

For schools, the lesson is clear – technical resilience isn't just about shiny features. It's about architecture, and testing and cultivating a culture that treats uptime as mission-critical – so that the teaching and learning need never have to pause.

For more information, visit parentpay.com

QUESTIONS FOR YOUR TECH SUPPLIER

1. **How do you handle unexpected spikes?** Look for horizontal scaling and automated cloud expansion that will keep systems responsive during registers, exams, or sudden parent-payment rushes.
2. **What are your Recovery Point and Time Objectives?** These define how much data you might lose and how quickly service will be restored after a failure.
3. **Do you run active-active disaster recovery?** True high availability requires two fully capable sites, so that the service can switch over instantly if one goes down.
4. **What independent certifications do you hold?** ISO 9001 (quality), ISO 27001 (security), and PCI DSS indicate mature processes and regular external audits.
5. **How do you manage supply-chain risk?** Ask about the financial health of key partners and whether network routes and data-centre providers are fully diversified.
6. **Will your support hours match school reality?** Early-morning coverage is essential when staff and parents log in before lessons begin.

By pressing for clear, evidence-based answers, schools can choose partners who will keep their learning on track – even when the unexpected happens.

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WHAT I LEARNT AT SCHOOL

Pam Ayres reflects on the pleasures of storytelling, performing ambitions, mind-expanding reading experiences and virtually non-existent careers advice that filled her school days...

What kind of primary school did you attend?
I went to the Village Church of England Primary School. There was one entrance for boys and another for girls, and a pond on the other side of the playground, over the wall. There was also a drain in the middle – if anyone was sick, somebody would come and throw a bucket of water over it to wash it away. That's one of the memories I've got, people being sick in the playground – not very savoury, perhaps...

What sort of student were you?
I was well-behaved and afraid of authority. I've never been very gregarious, and never felt the need for a big gang of friends.

I did have one special friend who I used to try and call on every morning, but she had a bad cartilage in her knee, so often couldn't go to school. I'd then go in feeling desolate, because it made such a huge difference not having a friend there with me.

What were your favourite subjects?
English – I was good at spelling and loved writing stories. I do remember that we were given these terribly racist books to read at a very early age, which stated as a matter of fact that we were a 'superior race'. When I think about that now, it's horrific.

One moment that still stands out for me was when one of the teachers, Miss Edmonds, announced that we now had a school library we could visit at lunchtimes. She knew I was interested in ponies – like so many little girls – and she gave me a book called *Wish for a Pony* by Monica Edwards, as well as *Just William* by Richmal Crompton.

They were a revelation. I can remember reading *Just William* and being convulsed with laughter, realising for the first time how much you could be made to laugh just from reading a book. That modest little 'library' occupied about a metre of shelving, but it was the opening of a door for me.

How did you handle the move from primary to secondary school?
My great advantage was that I'm the youngest of six children, so I was always surrounded by siblings, which gave me a feeling of safety. I could always look around and see a big brother, knowing that if anything went seriously wrong, they'd come to my aid.

What were your career ambitions?
There was no guidance; you just left school and got a job, whatever was going. I loved writing, but didn't imagine for a moment that I could make a living from it. I didn't think ordinary people like us – working class people from a big family – were the sort of material from which writers were moulded.

Have you been able to visit any schools and compare what things are like now, compared to then?
I've been visiting some schools recently with my Animal Stories books for young children, and I've been charmed. Things are so relaxed compared to when I was at school. Back then, you'd all sit cross-legged and maintain a respectful silence.

The children I've met have been so enthusiastic about wildlife, telling me all about what they've seen and heard. There's this great informality – no one's pronouncing to the children from a great height as they would have been when I went to school.

How did the Animal Stories books come about?
As a child, I took it for granted that wildlife would be around me forever. We lived in a village called Stanford in the Vale, where our playground was the countryside and there were marshy areas at the back of our houses.

And yet, during my lifetime I've seen it all diminish through loss of habitats, different farming methods and other causes, which is heartbreaking. I hate the idea of shoving everything aside to make way for us. I hate that.

I was asked if I'd like to write about our wildlife in its native habitat, but these wouldn't be fairy stories. They'd be nice stories, bouncing along in the best rhyme I could write, but strictly factual. I hope they'll encourage children to want to look after wildlife – because from what I've seen of the children I've spoken to, they're very keen to do so.

Pam Ayres is a poet, broadcaster, comedian and songwriter; her latest book in the Animal Stories series, *I am Dandy the Dormouse* (£12.99, Two Hoots), is available now

Don't count CODING OUT

Richard Hunt explains why, even in the age of AI, coding still belongs in classrooms...

Recently, I've seen the question raised, '*Do we need to learn coding when AI can do it for us?*' My response to that would be yes – and that learning coding is even more important for young people than you might realise.

As somebody who's taught children coding for many years, recent interventions from Anthropic's co-founder and CEO, Dario Amodei, stating that coding will be '*made obsolete by AI*' overlook what the true value of coding actually is. A formal study of coding doesn't just teach the basic principles of coding itself; it trains the brain to be elastic when approaching new challenges, processing information or finding new ways of being creative.

Human input

Coding is about far more than simply building apps and programmes; it also involves the development of some key skills that serve us all well in later life. Through showing young people how to code, we're increasing their ability to identify problems, analyse solutions and test theories – in effect, giving them a way of learning from their mistakes and improving their outcomes over time.

Following many major changes over the years, the education system we have today is barely recognisable compared to what it was during my own schooldays in the 1980s. The system has naturally had to evolve in parallel with a growing and ever more complex technological landscape, which in turn has altered kids' learning habits and routines. As chalkboards have given way to IWBs, we've now reached a point where children's learning is now supported by technology as a matter of course, some benefits of which are undeniable.

It is, however, important that we don't come to rely on these technologies to the exclusion of all else. With AI now evolving at speed, many in the education space are captivated by the promise of what it can do – and, in many ways, all that *we* won't have to do as a result. That's why it's imperative that we allow children to understand and fully witness the future of technological evolution, while also asserting the notion that *human input is still as important* – even in light of AI's existence.

Beyond the textbooks

Research has shown that 63% of students who learn coding at an early age develop better problem-solving skills than their peers who don't. They were also seen to demonstrate increased analytical skills, and even higher IQ scores in comparison to those who hadn't been exposed to coding. There are numerous occasions where evidence prevails that coding-based activities stimulate those parts of the brain that are involved in logical and creative thinking simultaneously.

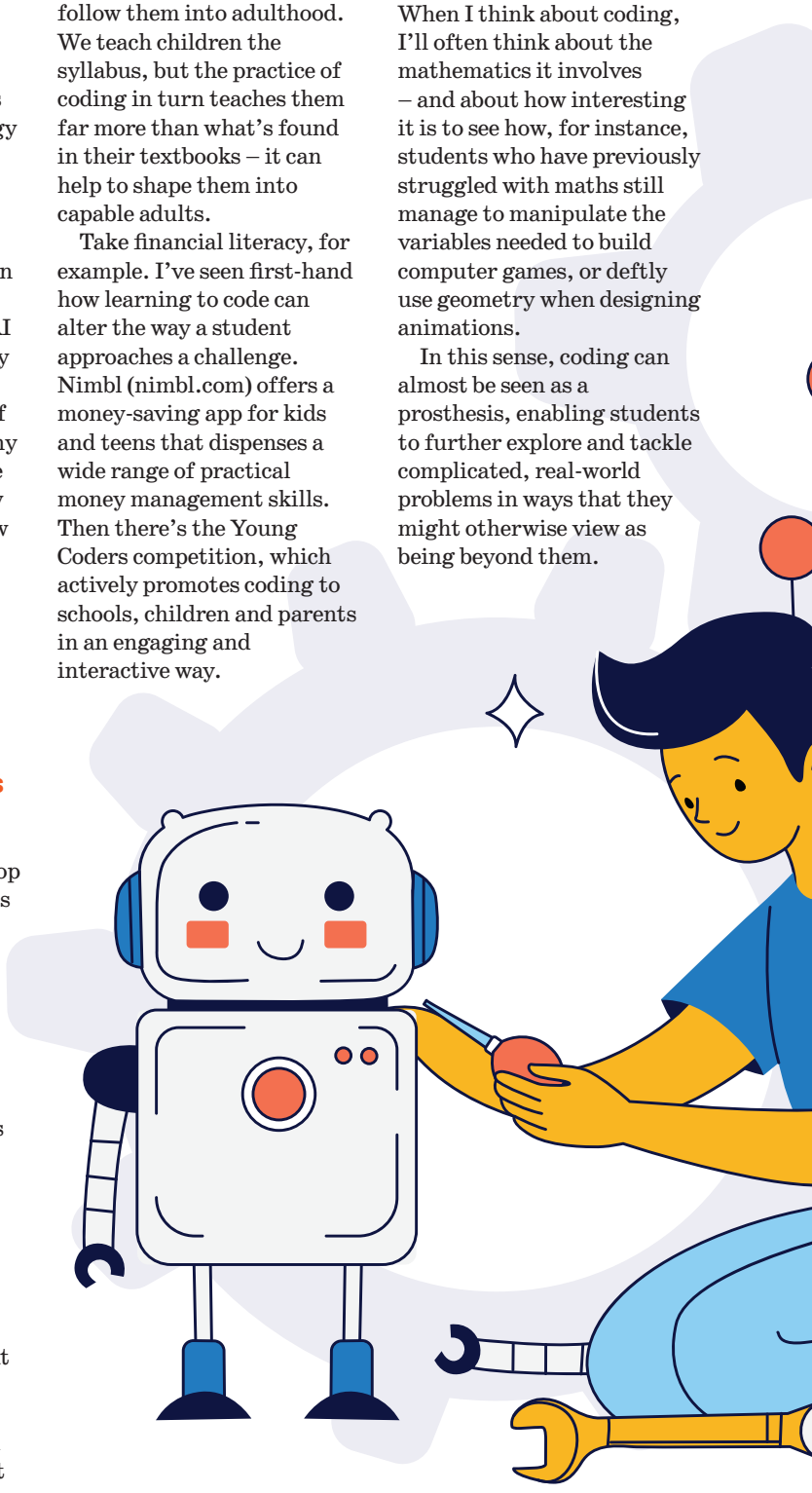
It's also worth noting that coding is a skill many students are currently learning at a crucial time in their cognitive development – a period in which children will often start to form patterns of thinking that follow them into adulthood. We teach children the syllabus, but the practice of coding in turn teaches them far more than what's found in their textbooks – it can help to shape them into capable adults.

Take financial literacy, for example. I've seen first-hand how learning to code can alter the way a student approaches a challenge. Nimbl (nimbl.com) offers a money-saving app for kids and teens that dispenses a wide range of practical money management skills. Then there's the Young Coders competition, which actively promotes coding to schools, children and parents in an engaging and interactive way.

Coding as prosthesis

When I think about coding, I'll often think about the mathematics it involves – and about how interesting it is to see how, for instance, students who have previously struggled with maths still manage to manipulate the variables needed to build computer games, or deftly use geometry when designing animations.

In this sense, coding can almost be seen as a prosthesis, enabling students to further explore and tackle complicated, real-world problems in ways that they might otherwise view as being beyond them.



By integrating coding into our curriculum, we're empowering our students to become more critical and creative thinkers, capable of tackling assorted problems head-on while also being able to identify multiple ways of approaching a challenge in order to ultimately reach a correct solution.

Perseverance and meta-skills

Beyond the gains to be had in terms of students' mathematical and technical skills, coding can also develop their ability to think abstractly. Abstraction, decomposition, pattern recognition, the building of algorithms – all are core to solving the kinds of problems students will be presented with during coding lessons. But so too are perseverance and various meta-skills, such as attention to detail; adaptability; accuracy; the ability to prioritise; skills of analysis; and a solid grasp of how to evaluate various processes and refine them.

It's a set of foundations that extends out much further than just learning to code, to encompass ways of thinking that can be applied to life outside the classroom.

As a teacher, I feel strongly that it's my responsibility to ensure students get the time needed to really benefit from what the study of coding, and technology more generally, can offer them. Every day, I witness for myself those '*A-ha!*' moments – the flashes of understanding that occur when children grasp a new concept, after it's been explained to them in a new and different way.

When students actively connect with the topics they're learning about, their excitement and engagement become palpably visible. In my experience, coding is one of those areas that truly resonates. What makes it especially unique, as a discipline, is that it teaches technical skills while also strengthening cognitive abilities that be transferred to other areas of learning.

Question, create, adapt

We've seen teaching practices evolve, diversify and adapt. Being aware of the changes arising, and those needed, is imperative to ensure that we're guiding young people to successful futures. Whether those be in the realm of coding or not, the impact of coding has helped students go from strength to strength in many areas and disciplines.

Perhaps the real question we should be asking ourselves isn't whether AI will write all of our code for us, but whether the *teaching* of it will continue to be necessary, as technology and coding practices continue to develop in the years to come.

It's my belief that teaching coding *is* crucial for young people, who right now are growing up and maturing in tandem with those advancements. Teaching children how to code is a necessary step towards fostering the next generation of programmers, but can also serve to equip young people with the mindsets they'll need to successfully question, create and adapt in an ever more rapidly changing world.

Yes, it's entirely possible that AI may yet transform how software is written and how we work with it – but those innately human abilities to think critically, problem solve and innovate? They will always remain at the heart of progress.

Richard Hunt is a mathematics teacher, Chartered Mathematician and former software engineer; for more information about the Young Coders compeition, visit codingcompetition.org

[MATHS PROBLEM]

VARIANCE AND STANDARD DEVIATION

Students are often confused about the meaning of variance and standard deviation, says **Colin Foster**

In this lesson, students use a visual representation to make sense of variance and standard deviation

THE DIFFICULTY

Two small classes of students took the same test, and these are their marks:

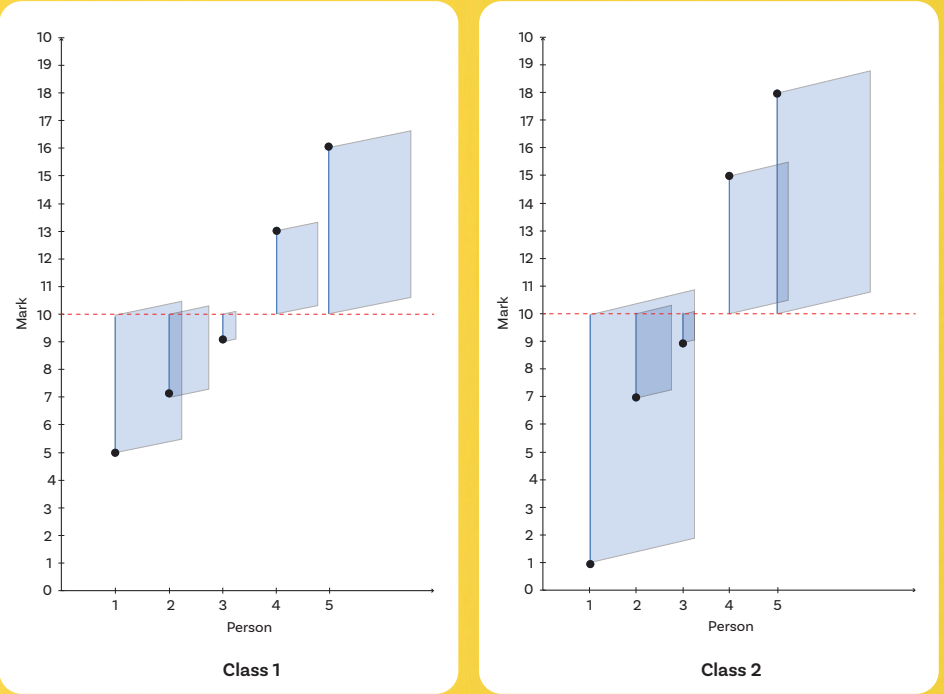
Class 1: 5, 7, 9, 13, 16

Class 2: 1, 7, 9, 15, 18

What's the same and what's different about the marks from these two classes?

Students might notice that there are 5 students in each class, that their medians are both 9 marks and that neither class has a mode. They might calculate the means, and find they are both 10 marks.

The range for Class 1 is 11 marks, while for Class 2 the range is 17 marks – but does this mean that Class B's marks are more varied?



THE SOLUTION

The trouble with judging variation by using the range is that its value depends entirely on the highest and lowest values in the data set. These two values are, by definition, atypical. Variance provides a way to measure the amount of variation by taking account of **all** *of the data values.*

We can visualise the deviations from the mean (10 marks) by using blue vertical lines, as shown in the figures above.

The deviations look larger for the second class, meaning that the points are, on average, further from the mean. But the sum of these (signed) deviations will be zero, because the mean balances the positive and negative deviations perfectly for any data set.

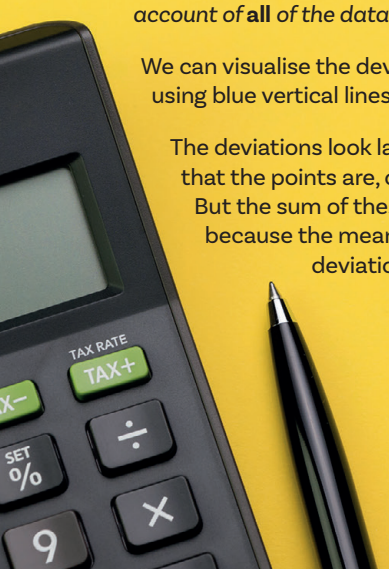
If, however, we **square** the deviations, they will all become positive, as also shown in the figures above.

The ***mean squared deviation from the mean*** is the ***variance***. And its positive square root is the ***standard deviation***.

Checking for understanding

Work out the variance and standard deviation for our two classes' marks.

Students should find a variance of 16 and standard deviation of 4 for Class 1, and a variance of 36 and standard deviation of 6 for Class 2. Class 2's marks are clearly more varied than Class 1's.



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**, **blog.foster77.co.uk**

LEARNING LAB

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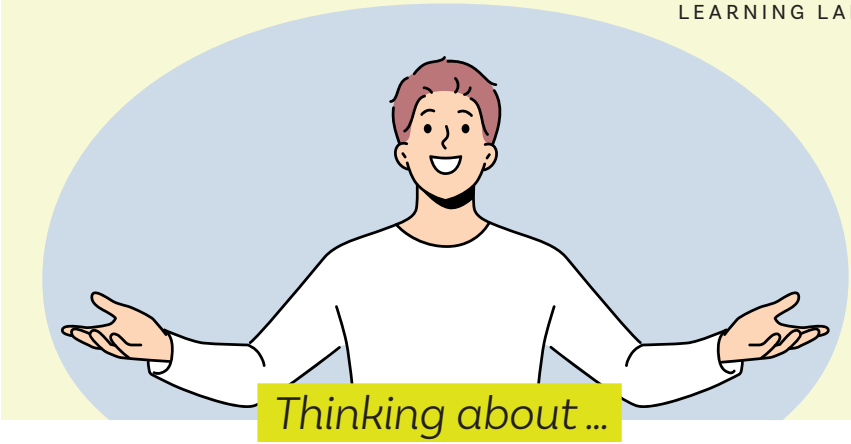


Thinking about ...

KINDNESS

It's widely recognised across education, industry and psychology that humans find change and ambiguity challenging. We're creatures of habit. If you asked someone not in education what a teacher's job entails, they'd probably assume it's just planning lessons, teaching them, assessing and repeating. No change, no ambiguity.

As educators, however, we all know that's not the reality. Schools are naturally dynamic places. Just in the course of one day, a child could break their leg, a teacher may be absent, a lesson might need covering or a parent might arrive unannounced for a difficult meeting.

NEGOTIATING AMBIGUITY

Teachers are constantly making micro decisions – adapting lessons, responding to student needs and managing behaviour, all to keep learning on track. While this still involves elements of change and ambiguity, these are the daily realities that we've become used to dealing with. It can be demanding, but it's vital to our role as teachers.

Add in updated guidance on government policies, such as the recently published White Paper, and there are suddenly added layers of complexity teachers need to navigate. Even when laid out in black and white, interpreting these new policies to fit our schools requires careful judgment and negotiation of ambiguity.

This is why kindness in our schools is more essential than ever. Teachers and leaders aren't just managing lessons or systems; they're navigating constant change while holding their communities together. These kinds of challenges are exactly why I developed the CHASE framework of kind leadership – **C**ommunication, **H**onesty, **A**ccountability, **S**elf-esteem, and **E**go management.

DEFINED BY COMPASSION

Kindness, as we know, is often misunderstood in school leadership. It doesn't mean being permissive or soft-hearted; it means remaining values-driven and transparent when clarity is lacking because people need to know where they stand.

It means creating psychological safety for staff having to interpret constantly evolving guidance, redesign processes or trial new approaches. Via the CHASE framework, adapting ourselves to cope with ambiguity can become a professional strength – not because the uncertainty has been removed, but because it's been turned into an opportunity for learning, rather than something to be afraid of.

When leaders model that, uncertainty becomes an invitation to think differently and collaborate. Teachers feel empowered to ask questions, adapt practices and innovate. People feel allowed to admit they don't have all the answers and make mistakes, but are willing to learn. When change has become the norm, it's kindness that steadies teams and strengthens their capacity to grow.

Our profession is defined by our compassion and our willingness to help others move forward, even when the path is uncertain. We're stronger together, and at our strongest when we choose kindness. At times like these, that matters more than ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Joanna Povall is the Principal of Wales International School, Abu Dhabi, UAE; her book, *Kind Leadership*, is available now (16.99, Crown House Publishing)

FOCUS ON... MISOGYNY

Misogyny is on the rise in education. This became evident when young people returned to school post-lockdown and brought with them the language and attitudes they had been seeing online.

Teachers began to hear echoes of Andrew Tate and other social media influencers expressing narrow – and sometimes extreme – views of masculinity. That hero worship has since tapered off, but we're still witnessing an ongoing rise in misogynist and anti-feminist attitudes.

There are no quick fixes for this, and we're not going to change any mindsets overnight. Through our work with feeder schools, however, we have started influencing attitudes before children join us. We maintain a clear focus on relationships in the sessions we run on transition days, and we're now starting to see these efforts pay off with our Y10 and Y11 students.

BUILDING POSITIVE VALUES

Young people with low self-esteem can be easily influenced by harmful online subcultures. That's why we've looked to focus on building better relationships among students and between staff and learners, so that we can discuss issues, rather than confronting and criticising one another.

From the minute they step through the doors, we help our young people celebrate who they are. We organise weekly sessions on the theme of 'Positive Me' which work to break down stereotypes, and through which they come to realise there is no single, simple definition of 'normal', and that 'positive masculinity' can appear in many different guises.

A teacher who hears sexist language will talk to the students involved, leading with questions rather than judgments. This is a whole school approach – not just a strategy for the wellbeing team or heads of year, but for every member of staff. The whole class can see that we take the issue very seriously, but also that we're willing to engage.

At a time when children are being bombarded with fake news, we look to counter misconceptions with carefully researched evidence and statistics. One claim we hear time and again is that women make false rape allegations, especially against footballers and other men in high profile positions. We counter this by presenting them with figures from Home Office and Ministry of Justice, which indicate that only around 3% of reported rapes are found to be false.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

Every school is different, and staff know what type of approach will work best in their setting. That said, some strategies that have worked well for us include getting our male staff involved in running assemblies and wellbeing sessions. This changes the image that 'wellbeing' is primarily a female concern, and helps get the message across that in fact we all have a part to play.

Mentoring has also worked well for us. We've found that some boys have responded well to having a strong female mentor, while others prefer to be mentored by an older student or someone with an interest in sport and fitness. A focus on careers can also help young people develop more realistic views of adulthood. We've asked parents to make videos in which they talk about their own school journeys, subsequent career choices and tell us something about their lives today, in an effort to get away from celebrity culture in favour of highlighting real-life role models.

It's a challenge to change school cultures, so it's vital that our approach is reflected in our policies, as well as our practices. That's why we're working closely with governors, staff, students and parents alike to build a community in which young people can feel both listened to and valued.

TRACEY NEALE IS ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER AT THE YSGOL GYFUN CWM RHYMNI SCHOOL IN THE RHYMNEY VALLEY, WALES, AND A CONTRIBUTOR TO THE 'HOW TO TACKLE MISOGYNY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS' REPORT PRODUCED BY JIGSAW EDUCATION GROUP; FIND OUT MORE AT TINYURL.COM/TS153-LL1

DO THIS

'NICE BOSS'

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

As a teacher, you will need two sets of qualities – to be pleasant and polite, as well as confident and assertive.

Being pleasant and polite is the decent way to behave, but also pragmatically helpful – not least when it comes to smoothing interactions, keeping relationships in good working order and making you a likeable person (or at least not an unlikeable one).

On their own, however, they're not enough. If being pleasant and polite is all you are, then some students will take advantage and behave in ways they know they shouldn't. Some might even try to walk all over you.

So, besides being pleasant and polite, you've also got to be confident and assertive. You must 'be the boss' and take charge of students' behaviour. Being nice is easier than being the boss. but you must ultimately project both in around equal measure.

When you're the confident and assertive boss you help make the classroom a safe place; when you're engaged in pleasant and polite niceness, you become a safe teacher operating within that safe place. The students don't have to worry about you or their peers because *you've taken control of both concerns* – with the result that their focus can remain on their learning.

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)

36%

of UK teenagers worry that artificial intelligence could take jobs away from them

Source: BBC Bitesize Careers Survey 2026

Readers will doubtless be familiar with the teacher retention crisis that has dogged the profession over the past few years. Well, it now appears that keeping teaching assistants in post is, if anything, proving to be even harder.

Analysis published last month by the National Foundation for Educational Research found that around 1 in 5 support staff left the school system between 2023/24 and 2024/25. Barring a brief boost in the aftermath of the pandemic, TA exit rates have since risen to the highest level since such data began being recorded in 2011/12.

As for why so many are choosing to depart, researchers found that those considering leaving their jobs variously felt undervalued, experienced low levels of staff morale and saw a general lack of staffing at their school. Other common reasons included the lack of career progression and financial reasons.

According to NFER's education workforce lead, Jack Worth: *"Support staff make up a significant proportion of the school workforce and are essential to delivering high quality education. As demand for support roles — particularly TAs — continues to rise, it is critical that the government tackles the growing challenges around recruitment and retention. Schools can also help strengthen this by considering steps to ensure support staff feel recognised and valued."*

Download the full report via tinyurl.com/ts153-LL5

HOW TO...

TALK ABOUT THE NEWS

As secondary pupils begin to look beyond their immediate surroundings and develop curiosity for the wider world, snippets of news will inevitably filter into their everyday conversations with peers. This is good for PSHE leads, who can utilise this real-world interest to shape engaging PSHE lessons using the day's headlines. The news you focus on could be the pressing stories pupils may have come across already, but don't underestimate the productive learning that can flow from lesser-known stories.

USE PICTURES

Before diving into technical terms or wider issues, kickstart your news conversations by analysing images connected to a story. You'll be surprised by the discussions that can flow from just one visual prompt!

A visual springboard makes news discussions more accessible, whilst supporting critical thinking and interpretation skills. Ask simple, open questions like, '*What do you notice?*', '*What might be happening?*' or '*How does it make you feel?*' This creates a reflective starting point that can be useful for pupils as they develop the vocabulary and confidence to engage more with current affairs.

Try to then carefully build understanding by exploring the story in more detail, linking pupils' observations with wider themes and PSHE concepts (such as social justice, sustainability or community cohesion), showing them in action with real-world context.

EMBED MEDIA LITERACY SKILLS

Incorporating current affairs into PSHE provides opportunities to embed media literacy ahead of the impending National Curriculum updates. Unpick questions like '*Who created this?*', '*What is its purpose?*' and '*Can the source be trusted?*' Introducing misinformation, bias and representation can, over time, build transferable digital literacy and critical evaluation skills that pupils can use online.

FOCUS ON SELF-EXPRESSION

Make room for pupils' reactions, as it's this introspection that can help support the development of emotional literacy. Prioritise self-awareness, emotional regulation and wellbeing by encouraging pupils to identify and articulate how a story makes them feel. This open discussion can highlight how people respond differently, how personal experience can shape responses, and how emotions can gradually change over time.

HOLD NEWS DEBATES

With oracy now emphasised within the curriculum changes, debating current issues is set to become a powerful way of developing communication skills and respectful dialogue. Frame debates around topical issues, such as '*Should social media be banned for under 16s?*' or '*Should fast fashion companies be held accountable for climate change?*' Establish some rules and boundaries, and encrourage both active listening and respectful disagreement.

KATIE HARRISON IS A FORMER TEACHER AND FOUNDER OF PICTURE NEWS (PICTURE-NEWS.CO.UK), WHICH PROVIDES SCHOOLS WITH RESOURCES TO CREATE ENGAGING AND EXCITING LESSONS ABOUT CURRENT AFFAIRS, PROVIDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN TO LEARN ABOUT THE WORLD AROUND THEM.

39%

of mums assume primary responsibility for managing their child's revision, compared to 15% of fathers

Source: Censuswide survey of 1000 parents with children sitting GCSEs this year, commissioned by MyEdSpace

Need to know

The Sutton Trust has published the findings of a study which reveal that the country's top 500 secondary schools (according to Progress 8 outcomes) have an average proportion of SEND students that stands at 14.8%, compared to 17.6% at the average comprehensive. Those figures do, however, only relate to SEND students without EHCPs; the top schools' proportion of SEND students with an EHCP was found to be 3% - the same as the average comprehensive.

Drawing on official admissions data and a survey of over 2,000 school leaders, the study further found that the gap becomes more pronounced when factoring in economic disadvantage. Students receiving both SEND support and Free School Meals amounted to an average of just 3.6% of the student population at the top schools, compared to 4.9% at other schools in the same catchment area, and 5.6% at the average school.

Sutton Trust CEO, Nick Harrison, commented, "*Schools appear to be actively discouraging applications from SEND pupils, but we should recognise the tangled web of assessments and incentives, and long-term underfunding, that prevent school leaders taking bolder action on inclusivity. This must change if the government is to deliver on its ambition to create more inclusive schools.*"

The full report can be downloaded via tinyurl.com/ts153-LL4

THE ART FILES...
SUBLIME LANDSCAPES

The first of a new series in which Hannah Day explores the connections and contrasts between two artworks sharing similar themes – one older and one contemporary...

- **Philip James De Loutherbourg, 'An Avalanche in the Alps' (1803)**
- **Nicholas Jones, 'Dawn Light, Cape Mercy, Baffin Island' from The Arctic Paintings (2019)**

The sublime is central to our understanding of landscape art. Students' engagement with this topic will allow them to consider landscapes in philosophical or religious terms, and thus create projects that link beauty to the very human connections we all make when somewhere sublime.

Sublime locations share the common attributes of scale, emptiness and/or danger. Unlike more cultivated locations, these wild, unmanicured places leave the viewer with a sense of smallness, albeit with the power of the location feeling noble, rather than cruel.

Philip James De Loutherbourg's 'An Avalanche in the Alps' (above) is a composition of destruction created by nature's force. Many historical and contemporary natural events could serve as rich sources of inspiration for students, using secondary sources as a basis for their studies.

By exploring chiaroscuro paintings (characterised by strong contrasts between light and dark) students can use oils or acrylics to produce artworks that explore the sublime. Working from a selected light source, before building up the mid-tones and finally the darkest areas, the dramatic outcomes can make for exciting final pieces.

For a more contemporary approach, we can look to the work of Nicolas Jones, which explores similar themes. Here, the immersive landscape, grand majesty and quiet dignity of a work such as 'Dawn Light, Cape Mercy, Baffin Island' (below) conveys a sense of immense forces that are hard for us to contemplate from our limited viewpoint.

Both artists have selected sublime places composed of minimal materials – the rock, clouds and snow of The Alps, and the ice, water, and rock of The Arctic. What's different is the context of these worlds; the bold exploration of dramatic new landscapes in the early 1800s, compared to the social backdrop of our contemporary climate emergency. We see De Loutherbourg's limitless possibilities weighed against Jones' slow, reflective quiet of a world that's inexorably changing.

HANNAH DAY IS HEAD OF ART, MEDIA AND FILM AT LUDLOW COLLEGE

On the radar *The cost of creaetivity*

New research from Cambridge University's Faculty of Education has sought to track the process whereby young people move from studying compulsory school subjects to opting to pursue creative subjects post-16 and eventually studying creative subjects or working in the creative industries in later life.

Based on an analysis of educational data from 1.7 million students, the researchers sought to identify the most common pathways into creative subject study in further and higher education, and gauge the extent to which young people's socioeconomic backgrounds might affect their transitions between subject choices at different stages of their education.

The researchers found there to be a relatively high preference for creative subjects up until age 14 before dipping, and then increasing again at key educational transition points – notably among those intending to enter higher education. One key observation is that these early creative preferences didn't seem to translate into opting for creative subjects at a later stage. Instead, the researchers found that up until 16, those students facing economic disadvantage (as designated in the study by being eligible for free school meals) were slightly more likely than their non-eligible peers to make a creative subject choice.

Post-16, FSM-eligible students appeared less likely to have opted for creative subject choices, even allowing for prior educational outcomes. From this, the researchers concluded that a relatively even distribution of interest in creative subjects among school students falls away once other factors – accss to resources, cultural capital – come into play.

This was further compounded by financial considerations affecting some respondents' career choices, the desire for economic stability driving them away from creative subjects.

The full report can be downloaded via tinyurl.com/ts153-LL2

TRENDING

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

REWARDING READING

The School Library Association and publisher Barrington Stoke have launched the Barrington Stoke Reader of the Year Awards. Teachers, heads and librarians are being invited to nominate Y7 and Y8 pupils who have 'overcome challenge to discover the joy of reading', with winners receiving a personal £100 book token, £400 of Barrington Stoke books for their school and a First News subscription. Entries close 15th May 2026.
tinyurl.com/ts153-LL3

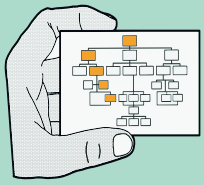
OUTWARD BOUND

The Field Studies Council has called for outdoor learning to become a statutory curriculum requirement. According to the organisation's field policy and communications officer, Joy Blizzard, "*The outdoor learning residential is rapidly becoming the preserve of the diminishing number of those who can afford it.*
field-studies-council.org

1 MINUTE STUDENT CPD

5 WAYS TO USE REVISION CARDS

ZEPH BENNETT OFFERS SOME TIPS ON HOW REVISION CARDS CAN HELP STUDENTS DISCOVER MORE NOVEL AND ENGAGING WAYS TO REVISE



1

GRAPHIC ORGANISERS

Use Venn diagrams to compare and contrast, and hierarchical tree diagrams to break down concrete examples

2

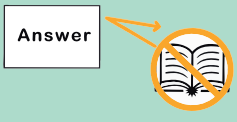
MISSING WORDS

When adding quotes to revision cards, omit key phrases or words so that when reciting quotes you're still retrieving, rather than just reading.

3

NO ANSWERS

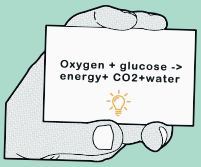
Create revision cards without answers on the back and set yourself the task of answering the question – if you can't, look it up



4

NO TEXTBOOKS

When creating revision cards, retrieve the information from memory; use question papers for the questions – but you provide the answers



5

ANSWERS WITHOUT QUESTIONS

Create a series of index cards with just answers; your job when using them is to work out the questions...

ZEPH BENNETT IS A PE TEACHER AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT LEADER WITH 25 YEARS' TEACHING EXPERIENCE; YOU CAN FIND MORE OF HIS EDUCATIONAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY FOLLOWING @ZEPHBENNETT.BSKY.SOCIAL

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

What's New?

Our pick of the latest solutions and innovations for secondary education

1 Trust-wide insight

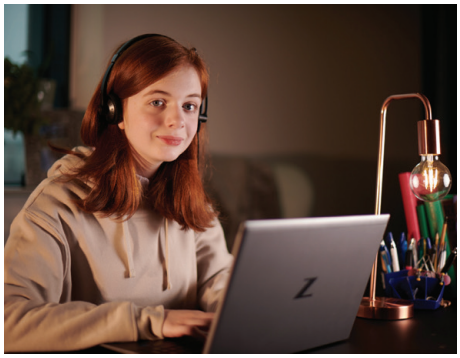
4Matrix Cloud delivers powerful analytics for schools, while 4Matrix Fusion provides trust-wide insight for Multi-Academy Trusts. Explore intuitive tools, dynamic charts, pupil reports and data visualisations, all seamlessly integrated with your MIS.

Instantly analyse progress, compare groups, evaluate teaching impact and forecast outcomes with confidence. Fully cloud-based solutions for performance data at your fingertips – anytime, anywhere. For more details, visit **4matrixcloud.com**

4Matrix®

Performance Tools for Schools and Trusts

2 Support when students need it most



Academy21, the UK's leading DfE-accredited online alternative provision provider, offers live online wellbeing support courses for secondary schools. Its *'Enhanced Support Courses'* include 'Anxiety Management', 'Social Skills', 'Wellbeing Mentoring', 'One-to-one Counselling', and 'Reporting and Monitoring', to support pupil wellbeing and track progress effectively.

Designed to complement existing pastoral approaches, these courses support pupils experiencing anxiety, disengagement or emotional barriers to learning. Schools don't need to be current Academy21 customers to access this provision. Working alongside staff, pupils get to feel supported, stable and better able to re-engage with learning. Find out more at **academy21.co.uk/wellbeing-support**.

3 Effortless learning

Imagine a school day where learning feels effortless, engagement comes naturally and teachers have time to focus on what truly matters – their students.

That's the reality with Access Education GCSEPod, the digital learning platform built around smart, curriculum-aligned content and powerful AI tools. From assignment creation and marking assistance to lesson planning, GCSEPod can help teachers adapt to students' needs while giving teachers actionable insights.

It's easy to roll out, simple to use and designed to lift outcomes across the whole school community. Access Education GCSEPod supports progress, empowers teachers and helps every student stay confidently on track. For more information, visit **gcsepod.com**.

4 Connecting maths to careers

Rise Maths resources help teachers build numeracy skills and student confidence while bringing the world of work into the classroom. Our KS3/4 resources are ideal for use in class or set as homework, inviting students to step into real-world professions such as accountancy, architecture or gym instruction, while applying mathematical concepts that might include statistics, algebra or probability. These career-themed activities inspire students to think about their future while taking their learning to the next level. Developed in partnership with Causeway Education, our free classroom resources will save you time and enrich your students' learning. To find out more, contact **rise.initiative@icaew.com** or visit **rise-initiative.co.uk/resources**.

5 Durable Wall & Door Protection

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

Our durable protection solutions reduce ongoing maintenance and repair costs, while keeping school interiors looking smart, safe and professional. With a wide choice of colours and finishes, Yeoman Shield products combine strength with style, allowing schools to protect their walls and doors without compromising on appearance. It's a practical, long-term solution for maintaining high-traffic learning environments. For more information, visit **yeomanshield.com**.

6 My Money Week: Money in My Community

My Money Week is a national activity week, running between 15th to 21st June, that helps young people gain the skills, knowledge and confidence in money matters they need to thrive.

Students can explore their communities and learn about money, spending, jobs, businesses and public services using the 'My Money Week Map'. The resources for teachers include ready-to-use classroom activities, local exploration, assemblies, and home learning. To get your free resources, sign up via **tinyurl.com/ts153-MMW**.

7 Thrill rides and Vikings

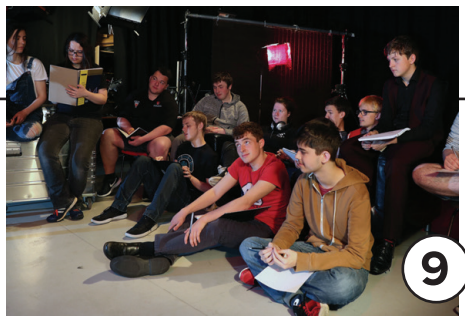
One of the UK's leading theme parks is set to strengthen its schools offering for KS3 and KS4 students. Launching in 2026, Valgard – Realm of the Vikings is a brand new, £12 million themed world that will include two major new rides, headlined by Drakon – a twisting, inverting coaster designed for fearless students.

With its growing selection of thrill rides, short queue times and reputation for quality, Paultons is fast becoming a top choice for secondary school reward and educational visits. For more details, visit **paultonspark.co.uk/education**

8 Make May purple

Every day in May, another 240 people will face the life-changing impact of a stroke. For this year's Stroke Awareness Month, we're asking schools across the UK to Make May Purple. You could organise a 'Wear Purple Day', host a bake sale with delicious purple treats or even decorate your classrooms and corridors in purple to raise vital funds and spread awareness.

These activities will also give pupils the chance to learn about what a stroke is, the warning signs to look for and how to build stroke-friendly communities. For further details on how to get involved and order your fundraising pack, visit **stroke.org.uk/sam**.



9 Setting the scene

Save the Shoot is a new free, classroom-ready careers resource from Into Film for students aged 13 to 16. Designed for whole classes or year groups with a wide range of interests, it uses film production as a practical setting to explore real-world careers and transferable skills. Students work in teams to tackle the kind of challenges found on a real film set – from planning and design to marketing and decision-making. The focus is on skills that apply across all careers, however, including teamwork, problem-solving, communication and creativity, making it ideal for careers provision, enrichment days or indeed any other time of year. For more details, visit **intofilm.org/careers**.

10 Better inclusive practice

Whole School SEND, through the DfE-funded Universal SEND Services programme, is now offering free 'Online SEND CPD Units' to help strengthen inclusive practice for learners with SEND. The offer includes 20 'Inclusive Practice Units', alongside five 'Autism Units' that focus on communication, sensory differences and supportive learning environments. Designed to fit around busy schedules, each unit takes around one hour to complete and is presented in clear, manageable sections. Units can be completed individually or shared as part of a wider CPD plan, with certificates available to evidence professional development. To find out more, visit **wholeschoolsend.org.uk,** contact **info@wholeschoolsend.org.uk** or visit **wholeschoolsend.org.uk**

EAL

FlashAcademy® Secondary

A comprehensive online teaching programme and pupil-facing app to enhance your EAL support provision

AT A GLANCE

- **An online EAL skills programme with curriculum-linked vocabulary adapted for secondary users**
- **Suitable for use in school and at home**
- **The teacher dashboard stores all assessment data and reporting**
- **Beyond the app, there is a wealth of CPD packages and practical resources available**

REVIEWED BY: RUTH ASTLEY

For classroom teachers, unlocking the world of learning for children with English as an additional language is an essential task, but one that can be extremely labour intensive. The secondary version of FlashAcademy®, however, could make a real difference.

FlashAcademy® is an online teaching programme that comes with a comprehensive range of online lessons for pupils with EAL. Its potential uses extend far beyond that, though, to encompass many helpful resources and tools for daily use in the classroom.

FlashAcademy's app interface is easy to navigate and designed in an age-appropriate way for secondary-age users – not something you can always say of EAL resources. The extensive package of lessons and videos provides early acquisition learners with all the language and skills development they'll need throughout their secondary school journey. Helpfully, users can also access the materials found in the programme's primary version, enabling teachers to dip into an even more extensive range of curriculum-aligned language resources and ensure smoother rates of progress for students.

The learning journey students take is clearly mapped out via programmes intended for groups or individual learners. The inclusion of assorted learning challenges and games, complete with live leaderboards, will help keep pupils motivated and engaged, and we're told that a custom lesson builder will be added in later down the line.

Powerful packages like this can sometimes be hindered by the design of their teacher dashboards, but that's not the case here. FlashAcademy's user-friendly dashboard interface makes all vital admin and information controls readily accessible, so that busy staff can easily use it to prepare lessons, assign tasks and set homework.

The programme's assessment functions are especially insightful, with the ability to baseline pupils before monitoring their subsequent progress across different proficiency bands. AI-powered marking features can provide teachers with highly detailed breakdowns of pupils' strengths and next steps for development, while also tailoring assessments to your particular setting's needs and cohorts. The grading systems provided are clear and precise, and could potentially serve as a valuable tools for tracking progress.

Then there's the extensive array of high quality training videos and materials intended to help teachers make the best possible use of the system, as well as the translated print documentation for parents and printable resource sheets for classroom use. One particular highlight are the 'learner profiles' spanning a huge spectrum of home languages. Each learner profile includes background information regarding the learner's home country and any notable cultural differences; key language language distinctions between a pupil's first language and English; any specific difficulties there might be in learning English linked to the home language, and more besides.

FlashAcademy® is definitely worth investigating, as it could well fulfil many of your pupils' needs and give their learning of English a real boost.

teach SECONDARY

VERDICT

- ✓ Easy to access and use
- ✓ Specifically designed to enable curriculum-aligned language acquisition for EAL learners
- ✓ Presents teachers with a wealth of CPD and support materials
- ✓ Ideal for tracking progress both in school and at home

UPGRADE IF...

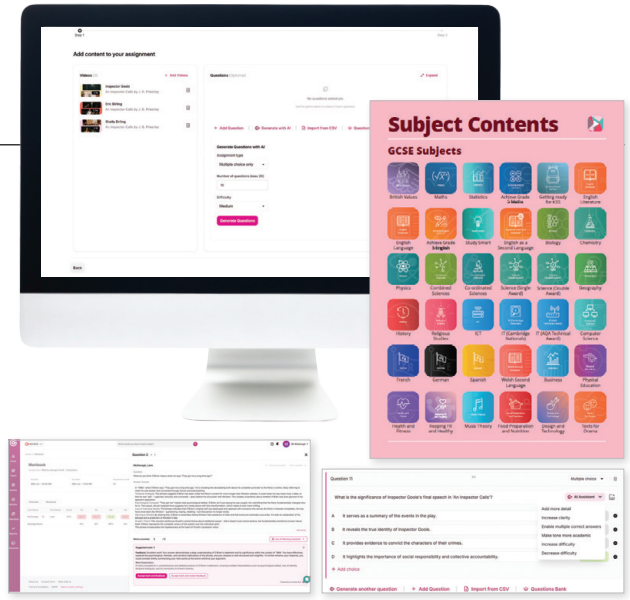
...you want a programme for EAL learners that does everything you could ever need, all in one place.

For more information, visit flashacademy.com

REVISION

Access GCSEPod

A digital learning platform designed to improve students' outcomes while reducing teachers' workload...



AT A GLANCE

- **Ready access to a library of over 13,000 'Pods' that deliver high-impact knowledge in manageable 3-5 minute bursts**
- **All Pods are mapped to specific exam board assessments**
- **Includes a suite of automatic marking and feedback tools**
- **Allows for personalised learning via a 'boost playlists' feature**
- **Comes with a range of accessibility features, including dyslexia-friendly fonts and support for over a hundred different languages**
- **AI Teacher Tools to support marking, assignment creation and lesson planning**

REVIEWED BY: RUTH ASTLEY

Finding homework that grabs students' attention can be both tricky and extremely labour-intensive for teaching staff. Having recently reviewed Access GCSEPod, though, I believe it could make a real difference.

Access GCSEPod is built around a library of over 13,000 'Pods' – concise 3- to 5-minute videos that use clear narration matched to simple, yet effective graphics to deliver revision content across over 30 subjects.

Units are clearly mapped out to include necessary vocabulary, knowledge content and learning and revision tips, and are aligned to all major exam boards. The platform goes much further than simply supporting homework delivery, though. Because of how it's structured, it could also be used as a pre-teaching, revision or consolidation tool, and features built-in opportunities for teachers to develop and plan lessons. The latter will be particularly helpful for non-specialists and cover teachers, ensuring that high-quality content is delivered to students at all times.

With its user-friendly icons and layout, the platform is easy to navigate. Teachers can quickly set learning tasks by choosing from a library of pre-built assignments spanning multiple subjects. Where other platforms will often rely solely on extensive reading and basic multiple choice questions, Access GCSEPod provides a wide variety of tasks, ranging from 'watch and learn' activities to exam-style questions that closely follow the format of actual GCSE papers.

For certain subjects there are also downloadable and printable workbooks with optional answer papers. Teachers can build their own custom assignments with a focus on particular question styles should they wish, or they can opt to use one of the platform's pre-built assessments.

It's the platform's assessment and monitoring areas that stand out the most, however, both of which are designed to maximise the amount of support students receive via a series of automated marking and feedback tools, including a marking assistant and a 'check and challenge' function. Multiple choice questions set using GCSEPod are marked instantly, thus giving children on-the-spot feedback there and then, and include scaffolded support.

Teachers will meanwhile appreciate how the reporting and monitoring dashboard affords detailed insights into students' engagement levels, with the option to filter results by class, gender, or time period. This lets you ensure that no knowledge gaps get missed, and that any interventions are targeted where they're needed most.

The platform can also automatically generate 'boost playlists' when students struggle with a specific assignment. These are tailored to whichever weakness has been identified and consist of suggestions for further practice and independent study, avoiding the need for teachers to intervene directly.

Also worth noting is how Access GCSEPod can be integrated with Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams for Schools and Students or your school's MIS to enable easy access via a single login.

Access GCSEPod is definitely worthy of closer examination. With its combination of classroom resources, revision tools and assessment features, all instantly available via a single unified platform, it could well be the learning platform, performance booster and workload saver you've been looking for...

VERDICT

- ✓ Offers an impressive range of exam-board aligned content spanning 30+ subjects
- ✓ Its in-depth monitoring tools enable straightforward identification of students' knowledge gaps
- ✓ Includes a range of accessibility tools to help meet the needs of SEND and EAL pupils
- ✓ The platform's visually appealing 'pods' facilitate short, sharp bursts of revision that will grab pupils' attention
- ✓ Can be used in school or at home

UPGRADE IF...

... you want a fully curriculum-aligned digital hub that supports your GCSE classroom delivery in an innovative way.

For more information, visit gcsepod.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
John Lawson is a former secondary teacher, now serving as a foundation governor while running a tutoring service, and author of the book **The Successful (Less Stressful) Student** (Outskirts Press, £11.95); find out more at **prep4successnow.wordpress.com** or follow **@johninpompano**

THE LAST WORD

Literary losses

We could wring our hands at the anaemic reading rates among boys and male teens – or we could acknowledge what it is that makes books appealing, and why all of us are now reading less...

Fake news alert! Well…fake-ish! Teenage boys rarely reading fiction is *hardly a shocking revelation*.

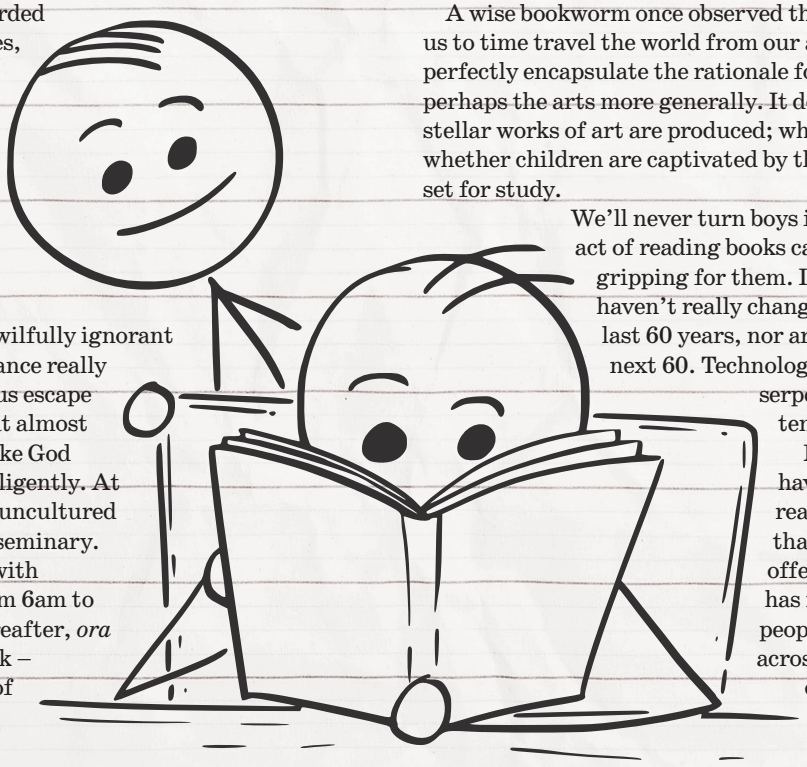
I grew up on a council estate in South London, and can remember how many lads at my primary school would devour plenty of comics, cowboy adventures and war fiction. Most of our families couldn't afford a TV set, so throughout the winter we urchins would read voraciously.

Once we progressed to secondary school, however, we would hang out on the streets. We ditched reading and took up smoking, drinking cheap plonk and playing games of 'Dare, True, Love, Kiss or Promise' – the latter marking our initial forays into the exciting world of juvenile promiscuity. *Books*? Pshaw!

Hooked on literature

Those teens who continued to enjoy reading classic fiction or quality non-fiction mainly came from affluent families and typically stayed on to sixth form. Most of the working-class fathers we knew read tabloid newspapers, sports books and hobby manuals. Our mums read women's magazines, Mills & Boon romances and more risqué bodice-rippers.

After leaving school, many lads naturally graduated to drinking in pubs. We regarded ourselves as tough hombres, decked out in our bovver boots, braces, Levi jeans and Harringtons, aping the style of James Dean. Now we too were reading the day's 'soaraway' *Sun* – albeit mainly page 3 and the sports section...



For a while, I remained wilfully ignorant of just how deep my ignorance really was – but then a miraculous escape from a tower block fall that almost killed me induced me to take God and the gift of life more diligently. At the age of 26, I became an uncultured 'late vocation' at a Jesuit seminary.

Every day would begin with meditation and prayer from 6am to 7.30am. For 14 hours thereafter, *ora et labora* – prayer and work – shaped my daily life. One of my greatest joys at that time was the nightly Magnum Silentium – great silence – which included an hour of supervised non-religious reading.

That's when I first discovered William Golding's *The Inheritors*, containing what I still believe to be the most moving depiction of death I've ever read. I wept with the Neanderthal, Lok, as he mourned the deaths of his partner Fa from drowning, and his 5-year-old daughter Liku, who he was unable to save from homo sapien cannibals. Lok curls up and dies of a broken heart on the burial mound of Mal, the former tribal chief.

This one fantastic novel got me hooked on literature for life. The most powerful stories don't just touch our hearts and souls; they soften and inspire us to re-imagine our lives, beliefs and values.

Books as time travel

Among all the novels I've read since, one of my all-time favourites is Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. I've never visited Afghanistan, yet I know that those who grow up there are, in some ways, just like me. We may not all fly kites, but we can all feel moments of immense shame at having not been courageous enough to save our friends from bullies.

A wise bookworm once observed that gripping stories enable us to time travel the world from our armchairs – words that perfectly encapsulate the rationale for teaching literature, and perhaps the arts more generally. It doesn't matter where stellar works of art are produced; what surely matters most is whether children are captivated by the books and dramas we set for study.

We'll never turn boys into bibliophiles until the act of reading books can become genuinely gripping for them. In truth, young men haven't really changed all that much in the last 60 years, nor are they likely to over the next 60. Technology is just the newest serpent in the garden that's tempting them.

Most working-class lads have never been keen readers; what *has* changed is that the instant gratification offered by modern technology has now seduced enough people that reading is down across *all* ages and social classes. Perhaps what we need is a reading resistance movement…

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