

Independent Schools Guide

Activism finds its way on to the curriculum

Schools are teaching children how to navigate global issues, says *Helena Pozniak*

Should pupils bunk off school to attend climate protests? This year, the swelling ranks of teenagers joining environmental demonstrations posed a dilemma for teachers. On the one hand, they want pupils to become engaged and active world citizens. On the other, they want to keep them safe and in school.

At Bristol Grammar School, staff mulled over options and decided against accompanying pupils on one of the first climate protests. "I mean, how uncool would that be, waving a banner in the centre of Bristol and having your teachers there to supervise?" asks headmaster Jaideep Barot.

Rather than officially permit the students to attend, the school laid on alternative climate

activities on the day. It is also one of the first schools in Britain to have a UN-accredited climate-change teacher.

Climate awareness is just one answer to a greater question: what exactly should schools be teaching? Mr Barot and many other heads believe "exam factories" have had their day and it's time to step up efforts to deliver a more rounded education, paying more attention to the bits in between academic subjects. Many independent schools are now advising pupils to take fewer subjects at 16, and focus instead on quality rather than quantity.

"Do you really need 11 GCSEs or so many A-levels?" asks Barot. "Parents choose the independent sector not only for the hard currency of exam results but because of the ethos. It's

desperately irresponsible, if you have the time and resources, not to encourage students to think about the bigger picture."

But how can schools ensure pupils are engaged and informed, and help them develop



Question everything

At Millfield School in Somerset, headmaster Gavin Horgan courts disruption from pupils. He encourages them to email him if they disagree with lessons or what's said in assembly, "and they do, frequently", he says. Their views feed into curriculum planning, recruitment, and building design. "Children need to realise they have a voice and to understand the importance of executing it."

a social conscience? Arguably, IB programmes, designed for the age of three upwards, cover global issues and real-life contexts – but very few British schools offer these to younger children, although the Prep School Baccalaureate, which values skills and attitudes, is now offered by 27 UK prep schools.

"We are teaching our children far too much stuff," says Professor Bill Lucas, author of *Teaching Creative Thinking* and professor of learning at the University of Winchester. "We need space in between to explore and have ideas." He's currently looking into how schools can teach creativity, which, he says, is linked to critical thinking – how to have good ideas and see links across disciplines rather than through the lens of a single subject.

Some UK schools, particularly at prep level, do take advantage of the freedom to teach creativity, says Prof Lucas. But, actually, it's an approach that can be embedded in any subject rather than a timetable add-on, and comes down to school culture and the skills of individual teachers. This kind of approach will foster the thinking required to tackle big intractable questions of the immediate future: migration,

Take a global view

At Bickley Park School, just outside London, boys study a leading global culture and can learn Russian, Mandarin or Hindi to a conversational level. And the humanities curriculum has been tweaked to educate children about fake news. "Most importantly, we don't just study events from a British viewpoint, but interpret them with a global outlook," says headmaster Patrick Wenham.

Waging war on plastic

From clean water to zero hunger, children at the London prep Knightsbridge School spent three days learning about the UN's sustainable development goals. Teacher Antonia Harrington was inspired by the Unicef-partnered campaign, World's Largest Lesson, which offers free resources to help teachers explore the global goals with lessons tailored to different ages. "Children really got behind it and wrote to their MP on issues. We've also made changes at school such as no plastic water bottles."

scarce resources, a heating planet and inequality.

"Resilience is a core part of part of creativity and critical thinking," says Prof Lucas. "Some high-achieving kids are good at regurgitating model answers but have never learned how to be creative, to keep going when faced with questions they have not been prepared for. Such kids may well go on to good universities but crash and burn because they've never had to think for themselves."

Schools in the independent sector have long sold themselves on the development of "character". But today this should mean more than toughness and stoicism.

'It's irresponsible not to encourage children to think about the bigger picture'

Marcus Culverwell, headmaster of Reigate St Mary's, has worked with the Independent Association of Prep Schools to help develop a programme called Education for Social Responsibility. "We've seen the strength of feeling there is among the younger generation, as it's their future we are jeopardising," he says.

Teaching children to take an active part in their society is something parents are keen on, too, says Mike Seaton, headmaster of Huddersfield Grammar School, who has spent hours quizzing families about what they want

How to spot fake news

Most young people get their news from social-media feeds "and yet little is done to teach them how to spot fake news and where the motivation behind it lies", says Leah Hamblett, deputy headmistress at Brighton College. Nearly 200 new fourth-form pupils spent three hours of their first day immersed in a critical-thinking workshop. Sixth-formers study a dedicated "fake news" course, which looks at news and data, with a few historical examples, touching on Aristotle and Donald Trump.

from their child's school. He says parents' concerns about "children spending hours on their phones while the world is in crisis", inspired him to revamp the school's offering with a hands-on challenge to his pupils. Students have so far looked at everything from cutting waste to laying on activities for children from less privileged backgrounds.

"It's not chalk and talk," says Mr Seaton. "It's a really powerful way to progress the student voice – I hope it will inspire them to make a difference to their communities – while developing leadership and teamwork. I hope it will make them think."

If inspiring pupils to think more deeply is the goal of educators, then Bedales School is trying hard. In 2017, the Hampshire school introduced a Global Awareness qualification, one of several alternatives to GCSEs offered by the school. The course, which looks at areas from human rights to the arms trade, has proven popular. "Students are genuinely interested in engaging with social and political challenges around the world," says headmaster Magnus Bashaarat.

Perhaps, say head teachers, a good education is one that prepares young people for a world where no one knows the answers. "To paraphrase Albert Einstein," says Mr Barot, "education is what remains when one has forgotten what one learned at school."



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Huddersfield Grammar School's 'Be the change project' develops leadership