



Blundell's
THOUGHTFUL THURSDAYS







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Delving into key themes and insights from our community survey to illuminate the processes that shape learning at Blundell's.

THE ESSAYS

Strategy and Vision	5
Bart Wielenga, Head	
Artificial Intelligence (Part I): A Survey Response	14
Charles List, Senior Deputy Head Innovation	
Artificial Intelligence (Part II): Its Role in Education	18
Charles List, Senior Deputy Head Innovation	
Character Education	22
Bart Wielenga, Head	
Research-Informed Practice: Professional Development at Blundell's	25
Emma Weaver	
Supporting Children in Managing the Online and Offline World	27
Matt Radley, Second Master	
The Power of a Diverse Team	30
Tammy Winsley, Director EDI	
School Finances	34
Bart Wielenga, Head	
The Ethos of the Co-Curricular Programme at Blundell's	40
Adèle Worsley, Deputy Head: Co-Curricular	
Artificial Intelligence and Science	43
Jonathan Ratcliffe, Deputy Head: Academic	
Why does creativi matter in education?	45
Lucy Richards	
AI in relation to pupils with additional learning needs	47
Andy Kingdon, Head of Learning Support	
Learning with Intelligence: How We Are Using AI to Support Every Pupil's Education	49
Charles List, Senior Deputy Head Innovation	
Disappointment, Setbacks and Failure Part 1	52
Bart Wielenga, Head	
'Empowering the Heart of the School: How Our Middle Leaders' Programme is Driving Excellence for Your Children'	55
Charles List, Senior Deputy Head Innovation	
Disappointment, Setbacks and Failure Part 2	58
Bart Wielenga, Head	
Beyond The Classroom: Outdoor Pursuits	61
Doug Morrison	
A Reflection on Teacher Training at Blundell's School	64
Hannah Perrin-Haynes	
Our Christian Foundation	66
Stuart Alred	
The Discipline of Change: How Schools Can Review, Implement and Reflect with Purpose	68
Charles List, Senior Deputy Head Innovation	
The Continuing Relevance of School Chapel Worship in a Secular Age	71
Tim Hunt	



STRATEGY AND VISION

by Bart Wielenga

A Focus on Holistic Development | Quick Executive Overview: 3-5 Minute Read

Blundell's recognises that education extends beyond academics. The school's strategic pillars include:

- **Cultivating a Culture of Excellence:** Fostering a culture of hard work, ambition, and high expectations while nurturing a supportive and inclusive environment.
- **Empowering Learners:**
 - o Developing Self-Efficacy: Equipping students with the belief in their own ability to overcome challenges and achieve their goals.
 - o Fostering Strong Teacher-Student Relationships: Creating a supportive and encouraging environment where every student feels valued and understood.
 - o Enhancing Metacognitive Skills: Teaching students to become independent learners by understanding and regulating their own learning processes.
 - o Developing Executive Functions: Equipping students with the essential skills for success, such as time management, organization, and goal setting.
 - o Promoting Collaboration: Fostering a collaborative learning environment where students learn from and support each other.
 - o Cultivating Resourcefulness: Equipping students with the skills and strategies to navigate challenges creatively and effectively utilize resources, including emerging technologies like AI.
- **Prioritising Well-being:** Creating a supportive environment that fosters student well-being and resilience, enabling them to navigate life's challenges with confidence and grace.

Key Strategic Initiatives:

- **Investing in World-Class Coaching:** The school has prioritised investing in expert coaching in key sports, recognising the importance of both physical and mental development.
- **Embracing Technology:** The implementation of a comprehensive Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) program aims to enhance student learning, improve organisation, and equip students for the digital age.
- **Continuous Improvement:** The school fosters a culture of continuous improvement among both students and staff, with a focus on data-driven decision making and regular evaluation of teaching practices.

Results and Impact:

This strategic approach has yielded impressive results. Blundell's has consistently achieved outstanding academic results, with A-Level results consistently exceeding national averages. These achievements are attributed to a combination of factors:

- A rigorous academic program: Challenging students while providing the support they need to succeed.
- A strong emphasis on character development: Fostering qualities such as resilience, integrity, and a strong work ethic.
- A supportive and inclusive community: Where every student feels valued and has the opportunity to thrive.

Looking Ahead:

Blundell's remains committed to its vision of nurturing the potential of every student. The school will continue to refine its strategic direction, adapt to evolving educational needs, and ensure that every student has the opportunity to achieve their full potential. This article provides an overview of the schools strategic vision and its commitment to providing an exceptional education that prepares students for success in all aspects of life.

On Strategy and Vision | Full article: 20-25 Minute Read

Introduction

In February 2019 we released a document entitled 'Blundell's 2025'. It set out the vision for the school and it has been the overarching Strategic Development Plan which has guided our thinking, planning and decision-making over the past 5 years.

In that document we stated that our vision for a Blundell's education is to be...

"A school community that is more thoughtful in understanding its pupils, and innovative in developing their potential, than any other in Britain."

Before we unpack what that means and how that has guided us over the past few years, it may be worth reflecting on what that strategy is.

Parental Survey

In our recent Parent Survey, a few parents asked about the school's strategy and vision. Some suggested there was a lack of clarity of purpose, and that they would like to know what the school's strategy is.

From the survey, it was not clear whether the reference was to the vision or strategy from an educational perspective or from a business model perspective, or more specifically, how the school was going to invest in shiny new facilities. All of those are part of a vision and strategy for the school, but they are distinct.

Different people will look at this very differently. As an educator, I would lead with an educational philosophy, and the business strategy serves to deliver a vision for education that is based on values that we believe in.

If you are a person more inclined to view a school as a business operation, then perhaps the strategy is focused on healthy cash flow, building a strong balance sheet and growing revenue. If you were to lead with that perspective, then the educational philosophy becomes much more pragmatic because the education the school will offer will be whatever it is that puts 'bums on seats' and ensures a healthy financial position at the end of the school year.

Of course, the school is a business, but we are a 'not for profit' organisation. We do not have shareholders who are expecting a financial return, but we do have stakeholders who are deeply invested and who do want to see a 'return' on that investment. There is a transaction and with that there are expectations.

Definitions

Schools are complex businesses with a variety of stakeholders. A school like Blundell's would be considered a medium sized co-educational boarding and day school. We educate just under 900 pupils from the age of 3 to 18, we employ around 400 employees of whom approximately 30% are teachers. We also employ accountants, chefs, engineers, cleaners, horticulturalists, counsellors, medical staff, and a variety of others. Our annual revenue is around £20m and most of that comes from fee income. A disproportionate amount comes from boarding and Full and Weekly Boarding makes up approximately 25% of the pupil community (with the Prep School having no boarding at all). A small proportion (approximately £600k) is generated by lettings in the holidays.

As well as being operationally complex, there is also complexity in the variety of stakeholders who have, at times, differing expectations. Employees are an important stakeholder, but even within that body there are very different expectations. Parents are the clients, but not the consumers. Pupils are the consumers, but not the clients. Old Blundellians hold a valuable and relevant stake too.

Outside of the organisation we have stakeholders ranging from the local community all the way through to the national government. Despite our independent status, we are still subject to many of the regulations that the state sector is subject to. We are inspected by the Independent School Inspectorate who, in turn, are commissioned by the Department for Education.

The complexity goes on when one looks at what happens within the school day – from boarding and catering to a wide variety of subjects to a vast array of sporting and cultural activities, as well as pastoral care, and the logistics of transport, pitch allocations, timetabling, catering, etc.

In his masterful tome on strategy, Martin Freedman says "Having a strategy suggests an ability to look up from the short term and the trivial to view the long term and the essential, to address causes rather than symptoms, to see woods rather than trees." (Freedman, 2013, ix)

The challenge of managing the complexity of a school like Blundell's is to bring coherence of thought and action to the institution. Coherence suggests alignment and it is about all the different elements that make up the school pulling in one direction without conflict or contradiction. It is a hard task, but if you were to ask me what my ambition for strategy is, it would simply be to bring coherence to all that we do. The role of leadership is to bring coherence

Michael E. Porter in an essay in the Harvard Business Review refers to strategy as "creating fit amongst a company's activities." He explains that it is not the activities themselves that give a strategic advantage over rivals, but it is the fit between the activities that is often difficult to replicate. Often the fit lies in the coherence and how different activities complement each other. Fit also often has to do with culture –

something less tangible but nonetheless essential for the effective operation of any institution. Culture is the lubricant that allows different activities and elements of the offering to rub together in a frictionless manner.

Porter goes on to say *“the strategic agenda is the right place for defining a unique position, making clear trade-offs, and tightening fit. The strategic agenda demands discipline and continuity; its enemies are distraction and compromise.”* One of the really challenging aspects that Porter emphasises is the needs to make trade-offs. Any organisation has limited resources – whether that is time, space, cash, or something else – and therefore trade-offs are inevitable. Blundell’s is no different. We cannot do all things equally well, nor can we spend without consequences. We are constantly making choices, and those choices are led by our strategy.

The role of leadership is to have clarity on strategy and then to make the difficult choices to move the institution a little further forward towards those strategic objectives.

One example of such a trade-off is evident in the decision we made to appoint specialist heads of sports in hockey, netball, cricket and rugby. Many parents have identified the need for investment in sporting facilities. We decided that sport mattered a great deal to us as a school, but that to be aligned with our vision for what a Blundell’s education ought to be, world class coaching was more important than world class facilities. We have appointed four outstanding coaches who will, over time, bring about a culture of coaching and training that will move all pupils at all levels of sports forward. Shiny new facilities will follow, but we chose to have good coaching structures in place first.

Mission, Vision and Strategy

Education is a peculiar product. For some, the impact of their education is immediate and almost tangible, yet for others their educational experience is more of a slow burn. It may be after decades that the full impact is realised. Perhaps so much time will have passed to the extent that the effects of a school education have become so diffused that it becomes impossible to detect. Realistically, unless education is simply measured by grades – which is not a school of thought I subscribe to – it is almost impossible to measure the outcomes of an education. Bearing this in mind, the following must be viewed through that foggy lens.

The mission of this school is to develop young men and women of consequence. People who are willing and able to make a difference in their environment: to their families, their communities and their nations. Our lofty objective is to make the world a better place through the virtues of a Blundell’s education.

Our vision is to be a school that is more thoughtful and innovative in developing the potential of its pupils. That includes all aspects of school life, not just the academic. It is about developing their athletic, musical, interpersonal, mathematical, linguistic, spiritual potential amongst many other things that make up the whole self.

Our strategy is comprehensive, and it falls into four areas:

1. The culture of the school
2. The school’s philosophy about education
3. The school’s philosophy about thriving
4. The business model, including capital development.

A bit more theory: the Hedgehog Concept

Jim Collins, in his seminal work ‘Good to Great’ sets out the characteristics of firms that have experienced extraordinary and sustained success over decades. These were not institutions who went through a purple patch, but rather ones that experienced success considerably above the trend in their industry over a multi-generational time period. In other words, the success was not down to an individual leader nor a particularly successful product. The success ran much deeper than that. One characteristic that Collins emphasised was that these superperson firms had something that he called a ‘Hedgehog Concept’.

It is based on the parable of the fox and the hedgehog by Isaiah Berlin, the Russo-British philosopher. Berlin tells the story of the sly and cunning fox who devised endless schemes and strategies to catch the hedgehog, but whatever plan the fox devised, the hedgehog just rolled up into a ball and the fox was powerless to overcome the hedgehog’s prickly spikes. Like the hedgehog, brilliant firms must have that one concept that makes them undefeatable – regardless of the cunning and sly manoeuvres of the foxes out there.

In education, finding that hedgehog concept is particularly difficult because what we are trying to do at Blundell’s is not especially unique. Most schools set out with very similar intentions. However, one thing that struck me is Collins’ emphasis that a Hedgehog Concept is something that must emerge naturally and is not something that can be created around a boardroom table. To approach that sense of uniqueness is has to be authentic and relevant.

Blundell’s is an institution that is over 400 years old and that has to be honoured. But more importantly, we have to pay attention to what has allowed it to survive for over four centuries.

When I go into more detail in describing the school’s strategy, I want you to bear in mind the idea of an emergent Hedgehog Concept. Everything we have designed and developed is based on what we already are and on what the school already is. Our efforts are to bring coherence to all that Blundell’s is and to translate that coherence into purpose and direction.

Strategy Part 1 – The Culture of the School

At the start of each term my message to pupils is and always had been the same. When I say ‘always’ I refer to the very short period in which I have been the Head. My headship makes up less than 2% of the school’s history! Culture runs a bit deeper than that, and it can not be comprehensively analysed in a few words.

My message is this: It is our extraordinary privilege and good fortune to attend a school like Blundell’s and it is therefore beholden on us to make the most of our time here and to take full advantage of the opportunities made available to us.

An appropriate response to this good fortune we enjoy is to show our appreciation by working hard and showing appropriate dedication and commitment to all that we do.

I repeatedly tell pupils that grades matter but that character matters more. I would go further to say that our attitude to our studies and our time at school reflects our character and positive character enhances our chances of success in all that we do.

I hasten to clarify that failure of any sort is not necessarily a reflection of character. However, I would argue that a strong character responds to failure differently to someone with a weaker character and hence the person with the stronger character is likely to experience more success, and perhaps more failure, particularly if we see failure as an integral part of success.

If I were to reflect on the success we have enjoyed over the past few years in different areas of school life, there are some constant themes that run through the staff and pupil body, which I would describe as being part of the Blundell’s culture.

Pupils work tremendously hard. There will be some pupils who are not working as hard as they could or should be working, and there are also a few who are probably working at a level that is not sustainable. However, overall, most pupils are working very hard. Working hard is the norm. Working hard is respected, being lazy is not.

Teachers are ambitious and have high expectations of themselves and of their pupils. One way in which this ambition is evident is in the three volumes of the Blundell’s Research Journal. All teachers are expected to do an action-based piece of research as part of their Professional Development Cycle. That piece of research can be classroom based, pastoral, or on any other aspect of school life. The purpose is to ensure that teachers are constantly reflecting on their practice and are seeking ways to improve. That culture of learning and wanting to improve is very much part of the Common Room.

That ambition is also evident in specific areas of school life. Not many schools take on Mozart’s Requiem as our Chamber Choir did two years ago. The number of Gold Medals in the various Science and Maths Olympiads keeps going up. No other school has as many teams entering the Ten Tors Challenge every year. Few schools can match the number of boys’ and girls’ teams that go to Rosslyn Park. This is not just about creating magnificent opportunities for our pupils; it is also about raising their aspirations and being ambitious to compete at the highest level.

When people think of a medium sized independent school in Devon, it may be easy to assume that it is a laidback and easy-going place – it is to some extent – but it belies the burning ambition and self belief of our staff and pupils.

And whilst ambition and hard work have perhaps been growing steadily over recent years, the cornerstone of Blundell’s culture remains intact. Authenticity, humility and a strong community make Blundell’s what it is, and I dare say that it always has.

Fundamentally, Blundellians remain grounded and are free from affectation – they are personable, friendly and polite, sometimes understated, and often with a good sense of humour. Culture is not something one imposes on an institution. It is something that emerges through its history, but like an age-old bonsai tree, it can be directed, shaped and formed. It takes patience and consistency, and clarity of thought. I believe that this is where we have made good progress over recent years in that we have communicated expectations clearly and consistently, and after years of repetition, the message is now becoming increasingly ingrained in the character of the school.

Strategy Part 2 – The Schools’ Philosophy about Education

Education is our bread and butter. Whilst a liberal and broad education is what we strive for, practically, at the forefront of our education is an academic one. Whilst we may rage against exams – and I do believe that the road is running out for GCSEs in their current form – there is a place for them and currently it is the most common form of assessment in the British education system. It is not the case all around the world, but a rigorous exam system gives confidence that standards are measured and upheld. There is a place for exams and as a school we recognise that success in public exams remains a fundamental measure of the school’s success.

Two comments on that:

Firstly, grades matter – not because they define us – but because they are the keys that unlock doors of opportunity. Whilst the tragedy of exams is that often a pupil self-defines their intelligence or potential based on their exam experience, the reality is that the better your grades, the greater the opportunities available to you. It is therefore worth doing as well as you can.

Secondly, success in exams is a relative matter. One person achieving straight A*s would be an unequivocal success. However, a pupil who was expected to get three Cs but ended up with three Bs has also undoubtedly been very successful.

Our educational philosophy is focused on how we can help pupils to become good at learning and how they become good learners.

We know that two significant contributors to getting good grades are hard work and excellent teaching. I think those are both imperative. In an environment like Blundell's, where generally pupils work hard and teachers teach well, there are still many other variables that determine the success of pupils. We have thought hard about what it is that helps pupils to succeed in their studies, beyond hard work and good teaching. We refer to these as the six levers for learning success. These six areas have been inspired by educational thinkers like the New Zealander John Hattie (*Visible Learning*), Barak Rosenshine (*Principles of Instruction*) and Howard Gardner (*Multiple Intelligence Theory*) but they have been enhanced by our own experience and understanding, taking into account Blundell's culture and environment.

Many parents will have heard me speak about these things at school events.

1. Self-Efficacy In his research recorded in the book *Visible Learning*, John Hattie tried to measure the effects of different interventions on the outcomes of learning for pupils. Self-efficacy ranked very near the top of the list. Pupils with greater self-efficacy outperformed those with a lower self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy can be described as many things, but the way we use it is in the context of how pupils perceive difficult tasks. A pupil with high self-efficacy believes that with effort they will be able to overcome something difficult. Someone with lower self-efficacy does not have that same belief that effort will ultimately lead to success and therefore trying is pointless.

We try to instil the link between effort and success in all aspects of school life whether that is on the sport pitches, in the science labs, in our boarding houses or in outdoor pursuits. Effort matters and makes a difference.

Self-efficacy is about our relationship with struggle. Is struggle something we avoid, or do we embrace it as a necessary part of success?

We know that the pupil who is willing and able to struggle for longer with a problem is more likely to succeed in the end.

2. Staff Endorsement As parents we may well sometimes hear our child tell us that a teacher does not like them. According to Hattie's research, there is evidence to suggest that the feeling of not being liked by a teacher is enough to cause a significant negative impact on learning. Conversely, feeling liked and endorsed by a teacher has a positive effect on learning.

This is more complicated than it sounds because, of course, this is about perception and not necessarily about facts. A pupil can feel that a teacher does not like them, or they may perceive an injustice that was not intended. Nonetheless, as educators we should strive to ensure that all our pupils feel that we care and are invested in their success.

Staff endorsement does not mean hollow praise. It does not mean selling an unrealistic dream to the D-grade chemist who aspires to become a neurosurgeon. What it does mean is that each pupil feels that there is at least one member of staff who they feel is walking the road with them, encouraging them, listening to them, supporting them and believing in them. This is not just about believing in them as athletes, or scientists, or musicians – but believing in them as valued, unique individuals.

It is easier said than done, but that is the intention of the tutoring programme, and I believe that much of the time this is done very well. However, there are over 600 pupils at school and over a 100 staff so that equates to more than 60,000 potential individual interactions. If 99% of those interactions were positive that still leaves 600 negative interactions! Positive relationships between staff and pupils is something we believe is a strength of the school, and I believe it is one of the reasons why pupils continue to be successful in their studies.

3. Metacognitive Skills In its simplest form, metacognitive skills refer to a pupil's ability to think and regulate their own thinking processes. In other words, it is about teaching pupils to think about how they think and learn.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that we all have our own preferred learning style, and we learn in different ways. The Covid period highlighted how many older pupils flourished when they were left to decide for themselves how to organise their work schedules. Some pupils preferred doing 30 minutes of Maths every day, others chose to do 3 hours of Maths all in one morning. Different strategies work for different pupils.

When younger years write internal exams, we encourage them to experiment with different revision strategies and to reflect on what worked and what didn't. Learning about our own preferences is about taking responsibility for our own learning, in itself a critical aspect of learning success.

A few years ago, we changed the school's marking policy from marking little and often to marking less frequently but with more detailed feedback. The intention behind that was to ensure that pupils have feedback to react to, rather than a book full of ticks that don't say much about the process – meaningful feedback that pupils respond to immediately.

Rosenshine's *Principles of Instruction* describe the steps towards pupil independent learning. Metacognitive skills are central to that.

4. Executive Functions Executive function refers to the mental processes involved with setting and accomplishing goals. We are all on a spectrum of sorts when it comes to executive functions. Some of us are ruthlessly efficient in identifying what needs to be done and then doing it, whereas for others the journey is a bit more of an ordeal! It may involve indecision and hesitancy to commit to a task. It may mean that someone finds it difficult to start a task or to organise an appropriate sequence of activities. It may mean that someone gets distracted and loses momentum towards that goal.

Those pupils (and adults) who have strong executive function skills have a significant learning advantage in terms of efficiency. They may not be more intelligent and someone with lower executive function skills may have a tremendous aptitude for a particular area of study, but their progress is hampered by weak executive functioning.

By focusing on executive function skills, we try to elevate the efficiency of all our pupils in their learning.

I can give various examples of how we work to improve these skills.

The first is through our Learning Support department. Much of the work done in Learning Support is to develop executive functions. The second method that is used more widely is a 'coaching style' of teaching. We use coaching in the classroom, in tutoring, as well as in specific one-to-one sessions.

The formal introduction of BYOD this year is in part to improve the executive functioning of pupils across the spectrum. We are still in the programme's infancy, but we believe that using devices, and more significantly, having a universal method of storing information and tracking work will level the playing field for the diverse range of executive functions found amongst our pupils.

Inevitably we are all on a steep learning curve and the use of devices absorbs a certain amount of working memory, but as we become used to systems and structures, the processes become automated and more working memory is available for actual learning.

In the past, when pupils sat down to prepare for exams, some pupils spent most of the first few hours trying to figure out what was in their files, what pages were missing, what order things were meant to be in, etc. It was a herculean task simply to get ready to start revising. We hope that with an efficient BYOD programme those obstacles will be mitigated for.

5. Collaboration I remember attending a workshop some ten years ago on boys' education. As an aside, there are some very good books out there that focus on boys in the classroom with titles like 'Boys don't try' (Pinkett and Roberts) and 'The Boy Question' (Roberts). Both start out on the premise that boys are struggling in the classroom and are more disruptive than girls.

At Blundell's our data indicates that girls achieve a higher Value Added than boys at GCSEs, but that it is reversed at A-Levels. I have my theories about that, but that is not the point of this essay. What I do find interesting is that generally speaking, it has often been assumed that girls are better at collaborating and that boys respond better to competition.

At this workshop the presenter made a comment that has stuck with me: "Boys don't like competition, they like winning!" How true. No one likes starting a contest knowing that you have zero chance of winning. I don't imagine that that is any different for girls.

There is a place for competition and used sensibly it can raise performance and engagement. It is also often fun. There is a reason why most of us enjoy competitive sport, and whilst we may not be as active in competitive sport in middle age, many of us nonetheless vociferously support our favourite teams in any number of sports. Imagine a Rugby World Cup where medals were only handed out for participation, or an Olympic Games where everyone's a winner! Where would the fun be in that?

So, unequivocally, there is a place for competition in learning, BUT so much more learning takes place through collaboration, and our obsession with competition often undermines the learning that happens collaboratively. The most productive teams in science, in business and in leadership are teams that have learnt to collaborate. They support each other and support each other's successes. Collaboration means that pupils are invested in the progress of their peers, not just in their own at the expense of others. Competition is a zero-sum game. If I win, you lose. In a collaborative environment pupils will take more risks, will ask more questions, will be less fearful of making mistakes and will learn more quickly.

6. Resourcefulness This last one we added to the original five after Covid. We learnt some important lessons from the period of lockdown when children had to learn in isolation at home. One of the things we recognised and have since built on, is that some children were instinctively more resourceful than others. The resourceful ones were more effective learners than those who were less resourceful.

It is important here to distinguish between access to many resources and the skill of resourcefulness. Clearly, having access to resources is an advantage over not having access, but that is not something we can always control. Suffice it to say, pupils at Blundell's have more access to resources than most children of their age.

The skill of resourcefulness is more about how we overcome challenges. A resourceful pupil will find a way whereas a less resourceful one will get stuck. Resourcefulness is therefore tied into creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. Resourceful pupils also instinctively understand how to use the resources at their disposal.

A whole new world which we are rapidly having to educate ourselves about is that of generative artificial intelligence. Mr List is writing a separate paper on that topic, but suffice it to say, our children will have to live in a world where AI is ever present. We cannot shut the door on this, and our children will have to become savvy in how to use AI to aid their learning.

AI carries threats but also undoubted opportunities in the learning environment. Just ask your children how they currently use ChatGPT. I am aware of many pupils who use it as an aid to revision and as a revision companion. Of course, the cynic will assume that Chat GPT is writing essays for pupils, but in my experience, whilst some will try to use it to take shortcuts, most of our pupils want to learn and will use it to support their studies.

Some examples of resourcefulness include writing a practice essay for History and asking ChatGPT to fact check it. In Science a pupil can ask ChatGPT to generate questions or to explain a concept in a different style.

We should be encouraging our pupils to be creative problem solvers. AI is one option, but it is essential that it becomes just one tool in their toolbox and that they do not become overly reliant on it.

Summary

We believe that if we make marginal gains in each of these six areas then the impact on learning becomes significant. When we articulated this academic philosophy about how to help pupils become good at learning we had no idea how profoundly successful we would be. Between 2010 and 2019 the average A*-B at A-Level was around 68%. Then we had Covid, and exams didn't happen. In the summer of 2023, we returned to 'normal' A-Level results and the press forecast an overall drop in grades. That year, for the first time, we achieved +80% A*-B. We were delighted but we knew that year's cohort was a strong one. When in the summer of 2024 – with a weaker cohort – we again achieved +80% A*-B we started to believe that what we had set out to do 6 years previously was perhaps working. We have not become more selective, but our results have increased by more than 10% and our value added scores are almost a grade per subject per pupil higher than the national average for independent schools (Mr List will write a paper on value added). In terms of value added we are ranked right at or near the top of all independent schools in the UK.

We still have much to learn, and there is still much that we could do better, but we are confident that we are on the right track.

Strategy Part 3 – The School's Philosophy about Thriving

When I meet parents for the first time, I often ask them what it is that they are looking for in a school. Different families will prioritise different things. Broadly speaking, the majority want a stimulating and rigorous academic programme and a wide range of co-curricular activities. However, what is almost universal is that parents want their children to be happy.

It is interesting how the pursuit of happiness has become so preeminent in our hierarchy of needs. Speaking as a parent, I appreciate that no parent likes to see their child unhappy or in pain. Suffering is deeply uncomfortable – by definition – and it is understandable that we instinctively avoid it and protect our children from it.

Happiness, on the other hand, is one of those things that eludes us the more we focus on it. It has a tendency to sneak up on us at moments we might least expect it – and it tends to be fleeting. Those moments ought to be savoured, but the hope that they will be permanent is unhelpful and such expectations usually leads to disillusionment and disappointment. Perhaps it is society's sense of entitlement in its relationship with happiness that is, in part, to blame for the mental health crisis.

Having said all that, I know that most parents get that and are realistic about life's ups and downs. What parents want it for their children to thrive and flourish. They want children who are resilient and who, in Rudyard Kipling's words, "can meet Triumph and Disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same."

In his important book simply called 'Flourish', Martin Seligman sets out a model for flourishing which I believe holds a lot of merit. Seligman is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and is credited as being the founder of the 'Positive Psychology' movement. His take on psychology is similar to the case of physical health. We can get ahead of the mental health game and build up mental health and fitness as a way of warding off poor mental health in the same manner in which we would sleep, eat and exercise as a way of building physical strength and good health in order to strengthen our immune system.

We have adapted Seligman's model and focus on four areas which we believe will result in our pupils learning how to live life well, or in modern parlance, which will help them to flourish and thrive.

1. Good Relationships

We want all pupils to understand and experience healthy relationships. Relationships with their peers, with significant adults, with older pupils, and with younger pupils. We want pupils to be compassionate and empathetic. We want them to show resilience in their relationships. We want them to learn to forgive and to say sorry. We want them to learn how to fallout and how to make up afterwards.

We want pupils to have the emotional resilience, not to become overly reliant on one or two relationships, and we want our pupils to have a strong sense of themselves, and not to rely on what is reflected back to them by those around them.

Relationships are usually the greatest source of joy and fulfilment and of the greatest pain and grief. Helping our pupils to navigate their way through relationships is both immensely challenging and important.

2. Achievement

We want each pupil to have a sense of personal worth and to have healthy self-esteem. For that to happen we want each pupil to have a sense of accomplishment and achievement. We want them to feel that they are good at something. We encourage pupils to find something that they are proud of and we discourage them from comparing themselves to others. Not everyone can be the top goal scorer for the hockey team or the soloist in the choir. Helping pupils to find things that they are proud of is key to their happiness.

That might be getting a lead part in a play or making the B team for rugby. It might mean improving your Maths test score from 55% to 65% or achieving your Grade 6 in the violin. We need to help pupils celebrate their achievements without casting an envious glance at the pupil who has achieved more.

Part of achievement is learning to savour successes. When a child wins 3rd prize in the photography competition, enjoy it and celebrate it. Do not begin by saying, 'next time let's win it!'. Yes, that may be a reasonable ambition, but we should take the time to savour achievements so that our children learn to focus on their own achievements and not on the achievements of others.

This is not a philosophy of ‘everyone is a winner’, but it is recognition that each pupil’s journey is unique, and we need to help them mark steps along their route.

3. Meaning

The debate around the purpose of education is an interesting one, and depending on your perspective on that argument, what defines a ‘meaningful’ education may vary. Leaders of industry may refer to work-readiness as the purpose of education. Those in the world of science may believe that STEAM subjects, including computer programming, are the skills most needed for a progressive economy. Social scientists may say that the greatest purpose of education is to develop a social conscience, and that principles of justice and fairness should be taught at school. If you were to ask a politician what the purpose of education is, the answer would vary from one politician to another depending on where we are in the election cycle and what will win them most votes!

Education is expected to deliver on so many different fronts and that is not just challenging for school leaders, but it is also confusing for children. What we set out to do is to help pupils find meaning for themselves. What matters to them? What do they care about? What are they passionate about? What the answer is will vary considerably, and that is healthy and appropriate.

What matters most to me is that each pupil finds something that matters to them, something that they are passionate about. It may be something that will direct the rest of their lives, or it may be a passion that burns out within years or even months. That is okay too. What matters is that our pupils have things that they care deeply about. The breadth of opportunities at a school like Blundell’s is designed to stimulate interest and pupils will hopefully find something that floats their proverbial boat. That may be in Outdoor Pursuits and the CCF and for those pupils a career in the military may be an option or they may become qualified as an outdoor education instructor. For others, they may explore aspects of faith and spirituality at school and that may well shape and define their lives. Others may find their passion in sport or music or art or animal welfare or human rights or philosophy or psychology. It is one of the great privileges and joys to help pupils find their passion. We hope that the vast majority of pupils will find something at school, although my experience tells me that for some that does not happen until after school.

4. Engagement or Enjoyment

We want our pupils to enjoy being at school and to have a great time. We want them to have many happy memories. Some of those will be spectacular highlights like singing Evensong in Westminster Abbey or completing the Ten Tors, but it may also be time laughing and chatting after lights-out in the dormitory. We want our children to have a lot of fun at school – and to really want to be here.

There is nothing complicated about it. School should be a positive and enjoyable experience. We are in the business of making memories.

Strategy Part 4 – The Business Model, including Capital Development

In the few years that I have been Head of Blundell’s, the one thing that I have learnt is that when people talk about vision and strategy it is often code for asking what investment is coming down the track. For many non-educators, the question about strategy is one about business. How will we raise revenue, manage expenses, and grow the balance sheet? How will we invest in facilities and what new things can we afford to buy?

I understand that – and it is a challenge I embrace enthusiastically – but the educational vision leads the business model. The business model has a direct impact on what we can achieve, but without an articulated educational vision, there would be no coherence to the business model.

I will write a separate paper on the finances of the school, but for the purposes of this essay, it is worth noting that the business element of the school has suffered unprecedented challenges in recent years. These have included meteoric and unprecedented increases in Employers’ Contribution to the Teachers’ Pension Scheme, a global pandemic, high levels of inflation, an energy cost shock, above inflation increases in the National Living Wage, the removal of Business Rates relief and the introduction of VAT on school fees. Each one of these is significant, but the aggregated effect is massive. There will be many schools on the brink.

We are in a position of relative strength:

- a. Pupil numbers remain robust
- b. Our long-term borrowing is low
- c. We have invested in maintenance – especially in energy saving measures – meaning that these cost saving measures have alleviated some pressure on our expenditure.
- d. Our cash position is relatively healthy.

Under more benign circumstances we may well have invested more in facilities, but due to the circumstances of the past few years, Governors have been understandably and appropriately prudent.

Having said that, there has been a considerable amount that has been done over the past few years. I will set this out in more detail in the Finance paper.

In January 2026, a large proportion of our long-term loan will be paid off. This means that less cash goes out annually to service the debt, and our capacity to borrow is greater. This may mean that there will be more opportunities to invest in facilities in the coming years.

We have clear principles that guide our capital investments:

- ;- It should be focused on enhancing the educational experience of pupils
- It should ideally benefit the Prep and Senior Schools
- It should generate revenue for the school.

We do have a plan, a 'strategy' for developing the site, but due to the various setbacks we have had in recent times, we are not going to advertise our plans until we are very confident that we can deliver. We do not want to raise expectations only for another setback to undermine our best intentions.

We had, for example, done a lot of work in securing planning permission for a sports facility (including a swimming pool) before Covid struck. Not only did the school's cash position change because of that event, but we also had significant inflation caused by post pandemic and post Brexit supply chain issues which caused the cost of the project to triple in the 2 years post securing planning permission. The numbers just did not add up.

As Mike Tyson famously said: "Everyone has a plan 'til they get punched in the mouth!"

Conclusion

We are mindful that we are operating in a very fluid environment. The former US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, famously said: "There are known knowns, things we know that we know; and there are known unknowns, things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns, things we do not know we don't know."

The introduction of VAT and the removal of business rate relief are two known unknowns. We know what they are, but we do not yet know how they will play out. We do not fully know how Blundell's parents will react, nor do we know how parents at other schools will react, or for that matter how other schools are placed to react. These next 6 to 18 months will be very revealing in that regard.

And then there are of course the 'unknown unknowns', the things we just do not know which await us around the next corner.

As such, strategy needs to hold a tension between being steadfast and flexible. Our vision for the school, I believe, is robust and there is a high degree of buy in. However, interpreting what that looks like in practice will evolve over time and will evolve with changes in leadership. That is appropriate and not something to be unduly concerned about.

Dexterity, deftness and responsiveness, are all valuable assets in an environment which has seen so much change in such a short space of time. We take pride in not being black and white about our strategy and we are comfortable with a degree of grey.

However, the work we have done around strategy in recent years has given us a strong sense of direction and purpose and we have created enough momentum to have steered through some difficult times. I would not want a strategy that is more rigid than what we have because it would have made these last few years harder to navigate.

At the end of the day a strategy is about making the institution fit for purpose. I am confident that our strategy achieves that.



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A SURVEY RESPONSE

by Charles List

THE ROLE OF AI IN EDUCATION: A BALANCED APPROACH

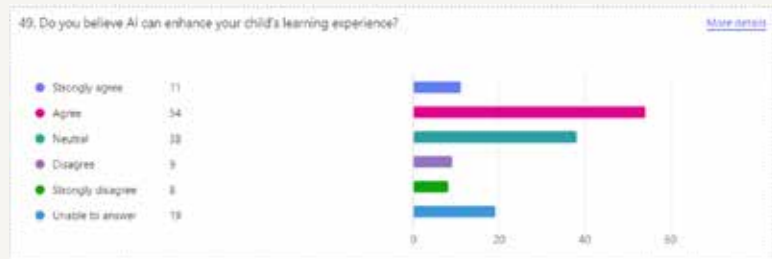
Artificial intelligence (AI) is undeniably reshaping education, offering exciting possibilities to enhance learning. However, with its integration into schools, it has also sparked concerns among parents, educators, and society at large. From worries about laziness and plagiarism, to the potential erosion of critical thinking and creativity, the debate over AI's role in education is robust and essential. If implemented thoughtfully, AI has the potential to become an invaluable tool to support pupils' learning and development. To achieve this, schools must strike a careful balance to ensure that AI enhances, rather than undermines, each pupil's education.

The diversity of opinions amongst our parent body in the recent survey demonstrates the importance in seeking this balance. When responding to the question about AI use at Blundell's, responses varied from:

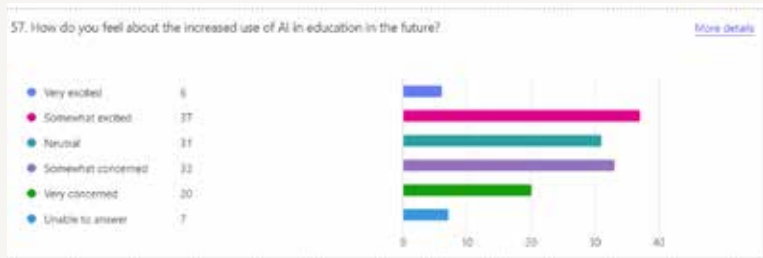
Why on earth are we discussing this? just because AI is out there Blundell's is not obliged to use it.

To:
I can't believe you haven't moved already on this and haven't adapted education to a rapidly changing world. We are already way behind and not thinking about this and how it's already changing the face of economics, politics, employment and finance. New subjects should have already been included in the curriculum and course content adapted to discuss and decipher how the pupils can live well with AI. It's not going away and it's clear the old ways won't be able to last. Time to accept and adapt immediately.

The vast majority of parents feel, as staff do, that AI might benefit learning, but perhaps aren't quite sure how, at this stage.



There is some excitement about how AI will affect education in the future, but also some trepidation:



THE PROMISE OF AI IN EDUCATION

AI offers tools that can support pupils in unique and powerful ways. For example:

Personalised Learning: AI can tailor revision materials to individual pupils, focusing on their specific gaps in knowledge. Tools like interactive quizzes, subject chat bots, and tailored challenges, can serve as a "revision buddy," enabling pupils to engage with content at their own pace.

Efficiency in Learning: Pupils can use AI to condense class notes, organise information, and break down complex topics into manageable chunks. This improves study efficiency and allows them to focus on mastering material. AI can also be a useful tool in providing prompts or enhancing brainstorming to help with essay writing.

Support for Specific Needs: For pupils with difficulties in processing information or writing, AI tools can provide much-needed scaffolding, helping them articulate their ideas and complete tasks without unnecessary frustration. AI can significantly enhance education for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) by providing personalised, accessible, and engaging learning experiences. Adaptive learning platforms can tailor content to individual needs, while assistive technologies like speech-to-text tools and AI for dyslexia can improve access and confidence.

Skill Development: Learning how to use AI itself is a valuable skill. Prompting to get a useful response, then filtering, evaluating, analysing, and adapting AI-generated content teaches pupils critical skills that will become increasingly important in the modern workplace.

Most parents also feel that there will be many specific benefits:



These possibilities make AI a potentially transformative tool for education when used appropriately. However, to unlock these benefits, pupils need to be educated on the effective and ethical use of AI, this is reflected in the concerns parents feel:



THE RISKS OF MISUSING AI

Despite its potential, AI in education raises legitimate concerns, the below also being raised by parents in our recent survey:

1. Encouraging Shortcuts and Plagiarism

Some parents worry that AI will encourage pupils to take shortcuts, bypassing the hard work of critical thinking and learning. Tools like ChatGPT can generate essay responses, solve maths problems, and write creative stories - leading to fears that pupils will submit AI-generated work as their own. This would undermine the learning process and could lead to failure when pupils are expected to demonstrate skills without AI assistance, such as in exams or real-world tasks.

2. Erosion of Critical Thinking and Creativity

AI's ability to provide instant answers may diminish pupils' capacity for independent thought and creativity. Critical thinking and problem-solving - the very bedrocks of employability - cannot be replaced by algorithms. Parents have voiced concerns that over-reliance on AI in education would deprioritise these essential human skills leaving pupils ill-prepared for the challenges of the workplace, and of life.

3. Loss of Teacher Engagement

Another concern is that AI could replace or reduce the human interaction that makes education meaningful. One parent suggested that, in some schools, AI was used to mark homework (although I know of tools and research in this area, this is not something that we are currently pursuing at Blundell's). The parent suggested that, in these schools, this had led to disengagement, with teachers relying on AI rather than understanding why a pupil struggled with a question or topic, as well as a reduction in the relationship between pupil and teacher, as the pupil perceives that the teacher does not care about their work if they use AI to mark. Other parents feared the depersonalisation caused by reliance on AI could undermine the small-classroom, personalised approach for which independent schools are known, and that makes their considerable investment worthwhile,

4. Spread of Misinformation

AI is not perfect. It can generate false information or present inaccurate content with an air of authority. This has led to parental concerns about pupils accepting AI outputs without verifying their accuracy. Additionally, the rise of AI-generated fake news and images highlights the need for pupils to develop a critical eye when evaluating AI produced information.

A Thoughtful, Controlled Introduction

To address these concerns, Blundell's feels that AI should be introduced into education carefully and with clear boundaries. Blundell's has a group that has been working on this over the last term, and has drafted the following so far:

Vision: We will harness the power of AI to enhance education, support pupils and teachers, and create inclusive learning environments, in line with the School's innovative ethos

Principles:

- Literacy: We will commit to provide first rate and forward-looking education for our school community; pupils, parents and staff
- Transparency: We will be transparent and accountable in our use and restriction of AI tools.
- Understanding: We will commit to understanding both the workings of and proper use of AI tools.
- Limitations: While recognising the power of AI, we will be mindful of its limitations, including identifying biases reflected or created by AI.
- Mental Health: We will be alert to the potential of AI to impact mental health, both positively and negatively.
- Safeguarding: We commit to ensuring we keep our pupils safe when using AI by monitoring the tools used and adhering to the school's safeguarding policy.

These will be delivered at Blundell's by:

1. Clear education on responsible use

Pupils will be taught that AI is a tool to enhance their learning - not a shortcut to avoid it. Lessons on AI will emphasise its limitations, such as its inability to think critically, its potential for error, and its lack of creativity. This will help pupils understand that while AI can assist with tasks like research or planning, they still need to use their own judgment and engage with the content themselves.

2. Clear and well explained ethical guidelines

The school will set clear rules for AI use, particularly concerning prep, assignments and exams. We will do this by explaining clearly how pupils can and cannot use AI in their work.

Our baseline assumption is that, with proper guidance, training, and clear AI assessment criteria, pupils will endeavour to use the technology responsibly and within the parameters set by the school.

We recognise that genuine errors or lapses in judgment may occur as pupils navigate this technology. Teachers will work proactively to educate pupils, helping them make better decisions in the future. However, in cases of deliberate misuse, appropriate sanctions will be implemented.

Definitions:

Blundell's therefore envisages 3 tiers of work with regards to AI;

AI free: This is work that must be done with no AI help at all

AI assisted: This is work for which AI tools can be used, within certain set and established parameters

AI embedded: This is work for which any permitted AI tool is allowed

If pupils are not explicitly told by their teacher, they can assume that the work is AI assisted. Pupils should ask their teacher if they need clarification or have questions before using AI for any work.

The school will reserve the right to use AI plagiarism detectors or teacher's academic judgment to identify inappropriate uses of AI. **AI Free** There will be times when no AI is permitted to be used. This will include examinations, in class assessments and tests, as well as some preps and other work.

AI assisted

There are situations and contexts within the school where pupils will be permitted to use AI tools to enhance their learning, and to explore and understand how these tools can be used. However, pupils should note that the material generated by these programs may be inaccurate, incomplete, or otherwise problematic. Pupils should check and verify ideas and answers against reputable source materials. Large language models (LLMs) tend to make up incorrect facts and fake citations. Code generation models tend to produce inaccurate outputs. Image generation models can produce biased or offensive products.

Pupils will be responsible for any content they submit, regardless of whether it originally comes from the pupil or an AI tool. Pupils may not submit any work generated by an AI program as their own.

AI assisted might mean, for example;

- Using AI tools to help understand a topic, perhaps by summarising the teacher's notes or explaining the topic in a different way
- Providing a 'first sentence' starter to overcome 'writer's block'
- Helping generate ideas in background research
- Refining writing, for example to spell check work and help keep to the correct word count. (If allowed in that subject)
- Providing a range of essay questions or writing prompts to allow a pupil to practise a particular skill or area of knowledge.
- Combining ideas in ways that go beyond current own technical skills, such as mixing images, music, and video, animating still images, or applying sophisticated digital editing.
- Creating questions, problems, and tasks to test understanding.
- Visualising mathematical and scientific concepts.

- Providing example solutions and work-throughs to build problem-solving skills
- Processing large amounts of data in complex ways
- Summarising larger amounts of data and research than a pupil could practically process themselves
- Ensuring that search results gathered use credible sources, and help with referencing so that credit is given where it is due
- Conducting research using primary source material such as images, sound recordings or video as prompts
- Summarising a passage of a pupils own writing to check that they have expressed themselves clearly
- Evaluating the success of a piece of work as set against examined criteria
- Demonstrating alternative ways of completing a task already undertaken, to indicate new methods of addressing a question or topic
- Suggesting actions that could be taken to improve work when completing similar tasks in the future.

AI embedded:

AI embedded tasks are those which have been set to collaborate with AI, just as a pupil would work with a partner in class. Pupils can therefore use AI in this way to help with creativity, to prompt ideas and with critical thinking. Therefore, pupils may be set work which requires use of certain AI tools to complete. Only specified AI tools will be allowed.

AI embedded means that pupils may use AI throughout their work to support their learning. Pupils should highlight any content which is AI generated, as they should not pass AI generated work off as their own. Pupils may be asked to evaluate the output of an AI tool in AI embedded work.

Special case: Coursework (Non-examined assessment)

Our school abides by the JCQ AI Use in Assessments Policy for examinations. This can be found here ([link](#)). AI tools must only be used when the conditions of the assessment permit the use of the internet and where the pupil is able to demonstrate that the final submission is the product of their own independent work and independent thinking.

From the JCQ policy, examples of AI misuse include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Copying or paraphrasing sections of AI-generated content so that the work is no longer the pupil's own;
- Copying or paraphrasing whole responses of AI-generated content;
- Using AI to complete parts of the assessment so that the work does not reflect the pupil's own work, analysis, evaluation or calculations;
- Failing to acknowledge use of AI tools when they have been used as a source of information;
- Incomplete or poor acknowledgement of AI tools;
- Submitting work with intentionally incomplete or misleading references or bibliography

3. Giving enhanced teacher involvement

AI will support, not replace, the role of teachers. For example, while AI could help identify patterns in pupil performance, it would then be up to teachers to interpret those patterns and provide personalised feedback. Teachers will still be the ones engaging with pupils' struggles, answering questions, and nurturing critical thinking.

4. Developing New Skills

AI is here to stay, and education must adapt to prepare pupils for the changing world. We will ensure we continue to teach well the "soft skills" like teamwork, empathy, and communication - skills AI cannot replicate. Additionally, pupils should learn how to evaluate AI-generated content critically, compare multiple sources of information, and identify misinformation. These skills will be vital in a future shaped by AI.

5. The school will collaborate with Parents

Parents will be kept informed about how AI is used in the classroom. Regular communication will address concerns, showcase success stories, and build trust in AI's role as a tool to enhance - not replace - traditional teaching methods. A working group involving parents will be put together in the first half of the Spring term, and this group will feed in to the schools AI approach. An AI policy is being developed, which will be shared with parents by the end of the Spring term. The intention is to communicate each term with the latest developments in our AI vision and guidelines.

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

It is crucial to recognise that AI is neither a perfect solution nor an inherent threat. Instead, it is a powerful tool with both potential benefits and pitfalls. When integrated thoughtfully, AI will enrich education by enabling personalised learning, supporting pupils with specific needs, and fostering new skill development. However, we must guard against over-reliance on AI, ensuring it complements, rather than replaces, the human interaction, creativity, and critical thinking that define quality education.

Parents' concerns are valid, and they highlight the importance of careful implementation. With the right guidance, AI can help pupils thrive, not only by enhancing their learning but also by preparing them for a future where AI will play an increasingly central role.

In the words of one parent: "If pupils are educated on its use well, it could become another wonderful tool to enhance their learning." By addressing concerns openly, establishing clear guidelines, and focusing on education's human core, we can ensure that AI at Blundell's becomes a positive force for pupil development.



THE FUTURE OF LEARNING: BALANCING HUMAN CONNECTION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

by Charles List

HOW AI MIGHT RESHAPE TEACHING: A NEW ERA FOR EDUCATION

In 1913, the great inventor Thomas Edison boldly declared, “Books will soon be obsolete in schools.” He believed motion pictures would replace traditional texts and teachers within a decade. Over a century later, his prophecy remains unfulfilled.

In 1984, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom introduced the “2 sigma problem,” observing that one-to-one tutoring produced pupil performance that was two standard deviations above those in traditional classroom settings. Despite decades of effort, no educational method has yet consistently matched the effectiveness of personalised tutoring in a cost-effective way. This enduring gap underscores the profound impact and usefulness of human interaction in education.

The latest purported educational revolution comes from generative AI, with innovations such as Khanmigo; a chatbot that claims to summon the wisdom of historical figures, guide essay writing, and even tutor pupils in maths. This offers a potential new solution to the 2-sigma problem, so do we now stand on the cusp of an AI-driven transformation, with the landscape of teaching and learning poised to change dramatically, with every child educated by an all-knowing, automated tutor?

Many, especially those companies with a financial stake in AI products, certainly believe so.

Yet history suggests that a more modest and gradual improvement is likely. Education, after all, is a very human, very delicate balancing act between efficiency and quality. And, as Mr Wielenga has written “*Positive relationships between staff and pupils is something we believe is a strength of the school, and I believe it is one of the reasons why pupils continue to be successful in their studies*”. AI cannot, as yet, react and change with how a pupil is feeling on that given day, to ensure that their needs are met.

THE CURRENT MODEL: A PERSISTENT LEGACY

For centuries, education has adhered to a familiar structure: attend lessons, be taught a topic, complete homework, take a test, and then move on. While the details of what is done in each of these steps has changed significantly as education research has developed, particularly over the last 10 years with the introduction of evidence-based initiatives like interleaving of work, and ensuring that pupils respond to feedback, this core framework has remained unchanged.

In theory, AI offers a new paradigm. It can personalise learning, adapting lessons to the individual, simulating the one-on-one attention that we know is so effective. Imagine an AI tutor that diagnoses a child’s weaknesses, tailors instruction to their needs, and works tirelessly until the problem is resolved. Sounds ideal.

But the reality is less dazzling. Generative AI, for all its promise, still makes mistakes. These might be mere “teething troubles,” but there is no guarantee they will be resolved. And even when the technology works perfectly, the biggest hurdle is not technical, it is motivational, and very human.

EDtech tools often shine in controlled environments, where pupils are engaged and use them as intended. However, in the real world, most pupils struggle to stay motivated when studying alone. A chatbot, no matter how clever, cannot replicate the charisma of a teacher who inspires a reluctant learner, or the peers that keep pupils engaged and learning in a lively classroom. And let’s face it; talking to robots feels sterile and uninspiring.

We also need to remember that one-to-one instruction, whether delivered by a human or a bot, isn’t always superior. Closer reading of Bloom’s work highlights that combining 1:1 tutoring with classroom teaching yields the best outcomes. This is because group learning generates its own magic: lively discussions, debates, and the synthesis of diverse ideas. These collaborative moments are essential not just for academic understanding but for personal growth. Every day, children come to school with two fundamental questions: *How do I do this?* and *Who am I?* Classrooms, buzzing with interactions, friendships, and the human touch, help answer both. Time spent with chatbots, however, can only address the former.

As I highlighted last week, parents have voiced legitimate concerns about the integration of AI in education. These include fears that it may encourage shortcuts and plagiarism, undermine critical thinking and creativity, reduce teacher engagement, and contribute to the spread

of bias and misinformation. However, I believe that by thoughtfully and deliberately incorporating AI into our teaching, we can move closer to achieving the “2 sigma” effect, without compromising the personal interactions and one-to-one attention that are the hallmarks of Independent schooling. In the words of Professor Rose Luckin, we should aim to “learn fast, act slowly,” ensuring that our approach is innovative, but informed and measured.

CALCULATORS THEN, AI NOW: THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATION

Nervousness over the introduction of AI into education has many echoes over the debates from the 1970s about calculators. Early resistance centred on fears that calculators would erode fundamental mathematical skills; parents and teachers worried that pupils would become overly reliant on these devices, losing the ability to perform basic calculations. Yet, by the late 1970s, attitudes shifted, as the benefits of calculators became apparent. Pupils were more engaged in learning, as calculators freed them from tedious arithmetic sums, slide rules and log tables, and allowed them to focus on higher-order problem-solving. Today, calculators are an integral part of mathematics education, enabling pupils to tackle complex problems with confidence.

This evolution did not occur overnight. It took nearly two decades for calculators to be fully integrated into curricula and for a consensus to form about their appropriate use. Similarly, AI’s integration into education will likely follow a gradual path; initially met with anxiety and perhaps scepticism, it will eventually be embraced as teachers discover ways to harness its potential to enhance learning, and parents see its positive effect on their lives, and the learning of their children.

AI’s trajectory will mirror the calculator’s in another important way: it will redefine what is valuable to teach. Just as calculators shifted the focus in mathematics from rote computation to conceptual understanding, AI will encourage teachers to prioritise creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving. However, this shift may turn out to be a double-edged sword, as it risks removing focus from the evidence-based practices that have proven effective in raising attainment over the last 20 years; this is the continuing tension that teachers will need to manage.

RETHINKING PEDAGOGY

AI challenges traditional assignments, but it also opens doors to innovative teaching methods. Rather than resisting AI, teachers can design tasks that harness its capabilities.

This will be around:

- **Critical Engagement:** Pupils could use AI to draft essays but then critique and improve the output, fostering analytical skills. For example, a History assignment might ask pupils to evaluate an AI-generated essay on the causes of World War I, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. This not only engages pupils in critical thinking but also deepens their understanding of the material.
- **Accountability:** Allowing pupils to use AI tools but hold them accountable for the accuracy and quality of the final work. In a Chemistry class, pupils might use AI to help design an experiment but would need to explain their methodology and interpret the results independently.
- **Prompt Engineering:** Pupils can be taught how to interact effectively with AI by giving precise instructions and iteratively refining responses. For instance, a language class might include a unit on crafting effective AI prompts, helping pupils develop skills they can use in academic and professional settings.

Prompt engineering, the skill of crafting effective inputs for AI, is becoming more and more useful; is not difficult but requires thoughtful engagement. Schools need to explicitly teach this, as by treating AI as a collaborative partner, pupils can learn to direct it toward meaningful outcomes, an invaluable skill in the AI-driven workforce. As an example, a pupil preparing for a debate might ask AI to generate arguments for and against a particular position, then evaluate and refine those arguments based on their own research and insights, in much the same way as an analyst looking at new markets for their business will use it to help make the best-informed decision.

THE ROLE OF AI IN ACTIVE LEARNING

I believe that AI’s greatest potential lies in facilitating active learning. Lessons that rely on passive activities like rote note-taking will become increasingly obsolete in an AI-rich environment. Instead, classrooms will become spaces for collaboration, problem-solving, and skill application as learning becomes more dynamic, interactive, and tailored to individual pupil needs, fostering deeper engagement and critical thinking. This will lead to more one-on-one interactions with their teacher.

Flipped classrooms, where pupils learn foundational material at home and engage in active problem-solving in class, will thrive with AI’s support. Consider a Biology class using a flipped model. At home, pupils might use an AI tutor to learn about photosynthesis. The AI tutor could adapt the content to each pupil’s needs, providing additional explanations or practice problems as needed. When pupils arrive in class, they would already have a solid understanding of the basics, allowing them to engage in activities like designing experiments or analysing real-world data to actively embed their learning.

AI tutors, like Khan Academy’s Khanmigo, already tailor content to individual learners and analyse performance patterns to provide targeted support. For instance, a pupil struggling with fractions might receive additional practice problems and explanations, while a more advanced pupil might be challenged with real-world applications. AI can even answer the perennial question, “Why am I learning this?” by helping pupils to connect concepts to their interests and future goals.

PREPARING FOR AN AI-INTEGRATED FUTURE

To adapt, we must equip pupils with AI literacy and critical thinking skills. Understanding AI's strengths and limitations will help pupils become effective "humans in the loop," leveraging AI's capabilities while applying their own expertise. This requires robust subject knowledge, as critical thinking and problem-solving depend on a well-connected base of information stored in long-term memory; therefore memorisation, deliberate practice, and thoughtful skill-building remain essential. While AI excels at summarising, coding, and retrieving facts, pupils will continue to need foundational skills and knowledge to evaluate AI-generated content, solve novel problems, and engage deeply with complex ideas.

For example, a pupil writing a research paper on climate change might use AI to generate an outline or locate relevant studies, but would still need to synthesise the information and present a coherent argument. This is where teachers need to be careful with AI; it won't change the fundamental business of teaching, but we can use it to make our time with pupils more effective. Properly used, it will be another step on the journey to making our teaching better.

AI FOR TEACHERS AND TEACHING

AI will therefore enhance the effectiveness of teachers. They will use AI to easily and quickly create active learning experiences, ensuring that each pupil is engaged and challenged appropriately. For instance, an English teacher might use AI to generate discussion prompts tailored to different reading levels, allowing all pupils to participate meaningfully in a class discussion. Here too teachers will rely on their expertise to interpret and refine AI's contributions, as this aforementioned English teacher would need to tailor the content to their pupils' needs after AI has done the bulk of the work.

One of the key benefits of AI is that it levels the playing field; we are all really good at certain parts of our jobs, but not the best at other parts. For example, AI is less creative than the most creative people, but much more creative than most people. So, most people can use AI to be more creative, even though it won't get near the best (yet!). This means that AI can help all teachers address their weaknesses, levelling the playing field across the school, and therefore increasing the benefit for all pupils. This is particularly useful in middle management, where a Head of Department who struggles with data analysis might use AI to identify trends in pupil performance, while a Head of Year could use AI to boost their creativity by providing lots of ideas for pupil socials.

AI AND THE TEACHER'S ROLE: WHAT SHOULD WE HOLD ON TO?

A key benefit of AI is its ability to handle the "no joy" parts of any job, tasks that are important but often time-consuming and repetitive. However, in education, this introduces a tension, as much of a teacher's work is deliberately time-intensive. Tasks like writing reports and marking require careful thought, and the time spent on them is part of what gives them value. To write an effective report, a teacher must understand the pupil's strengths, challenges, and how to give feedback that truly resonates. Similarly, meaningful comments on a piece of work rely on knowledge of the pupil's past performance and progress. The fact that these tasks take time is, in many ways, the point.

AI-generated reports and feedback will likely be of high quality, perhaps even better, than that which teachers can produce within their time constraints. AI could provide detailed, targeted feedback on tasks like the first draft of History coursework, often more comprehensively than a teacher could manage in the limited time they have available. This raises an important question: if AI can improve the quality of these tasks, is it wrong **not** to use it?

While these time-consuming tasks are meaningful when completed by teachers, AI can perform them quickly and, in some cases, more effectively. Does the reduced time investment make the work less valuable, even if it is technically better? Moreover, if AI frees up teachers to spend more time working one-on-one with pupils or creating personalised resources, this could lead to improved pupil outcomes.

Is this a trade-off our educational community is prepared to make?

AI IN THE CLASSROOM: ENHANCING, NOT REPLACING, THE HUMAN TOUCH

The '*co-intelligence*', the partnership between humans and AI (first written about by Ethan Mollick in 2023), could narrow performance gaps and elevate overall educational quality. Like calculators before it, AI will shift the focus of education, enabling us to prioritise creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, while not forgetting that these can only exist on the solid foundation of knowledge, purposeful practice, and repetition. While AI cannot replace the nuanced judgment and empathy of a skilled teacher, it can amplify their effectiveness, enabling them to focus, and spend more time on, what they do best: inspiring and guiding their pupils. AI can lighten the burden of marking and provide targeted support to struggling pupils, freeing teachers to focus on the human aspects of their role. In this future, technology doesn't supplant the classroom; it enriches it.

Edison's dream of a revolution was premature in 1913, and those preaching that AI will change education completely in the near future are similarly premature. The excitement around AI in education is based on the assumption that more individual instruction is always better, but the magic of learning lies as much in connection with others as in comprehension of material. If we are to harness AI's potential, we must remember this truth: education is as much about building people as it is about teaching content. AI is already changing education, and its impact will continue to grow. While there will be challenges, the careful and thoughtful integration of AI, in consultation with the whole school community, ultimately promises to enhance teaching and learning.

The path forward will not be without obstacles, but history shows that education adapts and thrives in the face of technological change. By integrating AI thoughtfully and strategically, without losing sight of the key areas of teaching that make novice pupils into experts, we can create a more dynamic, inclusive, and effective educational system for our pupils. This will ensure that they are not only better prepared for the future, but also have the knowledge and skills needed to shape it.

DISCLAIMER: I USED AI TO HELP ME WRITE THIS ESSAY.

My process involved dictating my thoughts as a “stream of consciousness” into ChatGPT. I then asked it to summarise these ideas into different areas, which helped me group them effectively before I started writing. Two or three times, I used it to help me finish a sentence when I knew what I wanted to say but could not quite work out how to express it. I found it most useful when I asked it to provide me with ten different options for each subheading, allowing me to choose the one I liked best!



THE LAST HUMAN FREEDOM: CHOICE, CHARACTER, AND RESPONSIBILITY

by Bart Wielenga

INTRODUCTION

Every Year 9 pupil at Blundell's has a lesson a week on Character Education. In the very first session, one of the first tasks I set for each class is around choice: do our choices define our character, or is it our character that determines our choices? As we begin to unpack that rather vexing matter, we generally stumble across further questions like whether our character is shaped by our environment or whether it is genetic; something we inherit from our parents? How much agency do we have in determining our character? I ask pupils how they would define 'good character' and also what the point of having a 'good character' is.

These are great questions, and 13- and 14-year-old pupils are very able to engage in a meaningful debate about them. They have an innate curiosity about who they are and why they are the way they are. One of the appealing aspects of Character lessons is that there are no exams or tests, and in reality, there are probably no right or wrong answers. That frees pupils up to explore and, hopefully, to take risks in their exploration of this important subject.

I often tell pupils and parents that grades matter, but character matters more. Frustratingly, it has, on more than one occasion, been fed back to me that parents have interpreted that as meaning that grades do not matter. It is a baffling conclusion to draw from a very important statement. Of course, grades matter. Good grades open all sorts of opportunities and at the end of the day, it is the bread and butter of our profession in this country (not all countries put quite the same emphasis on grades as we do here in the UK). However, I strongly believe that we are not defined by our grades, and whilst they may determine where we start our post-school journey, they will most certainly not be the deciding factor in where we end up.

Other than for the most selective university courses, grades will not be the most significant factor immediately after school. Even for those courses, like medicine, simply having good grades isn't a guarantee of winning a place. Character is far more likely to have a significant impact than our grades on almost all facets of our post-school lives: as employers and as employees, as a spouse or a parent or a friend. Character will play a key part in your work ethic and your attitude to contributing to society. Your character is far more likely, in the long run, to determine the choices you make and what you choose to make of your life.

Choices! That is where we started the conversation: is your character the result of your choices or are your choices the result of your character. My pupils will almost always conclude that the answer is both! Character is shaped by the choices we make. Good choices strengthen our character, whereas poor choices undermine our character. That implies agency. If we can make more good choices than bad ones, then on balance our character will strengthen and grow. So, what do we do with bad choices? Well, my pupils will tell me, if we reflect on our poor choices and we learn from them, then perhaps we can turn them into positive choices. For example, if I have said something unkind about one of my friends behind their backs, that does not feel great – especially if our friend finds out – however, if I take responsibility and apologise and make amends then, ultimately, I will grow from it, and perhaps our relationship will be restored and even strengthened. I will learn lessons about humility and forgiveness and mercy and compassion and lots of other good things.

Tending to our character and taking responsibility for it is one of the most important life lessons we can teach children. At Blundell's, our ambition is to give pupils an emotional literacy to begin the process of learning about and accepting themselves. What a privilege that is for us.

IS CHARACTER 'TAUGHT' OR 'CAUGHT'?

HSchools like Blundell's offer a varied and enriching co-curricular programme with one of the key intentions being the development of character. It is assumed that by playing team sport, undertaking challenging physical activities, like Ten Tors, through to the discipline of choral and orchestral music, and the creativity and supportive nature of drama performances, pupils acquire certain character strengths.

I am sure that is true. How can the Grade 8 clarinetist not develop intrinsic motivation and self-discipline? How can you not build resilience and grit when walking 35-miles across Dartmoor? How can you not learn something about teamwork and camaraderie from playing hockey for the U14C team? There are so many wonderful lessons pupils learn from all these activities, and it certainly is one of the main reasons we do them and why it is such an important aspect of school life.

There is an element of learning by doing. You can't learn everything from a book.

VIKTOR FRANKL AND CHOICES

Having said that, there is a particular book that I have found inspirational and which we have used as the basis for helping pupils to reflect on the choices that they make. The book is called 'Man's Search for Meaning' by the Austrian psychologist and neurologist Viktor Frankl (1905 – 1997). Frankl was a Holocaust survivor and the first part of this short book describes his time in various concentration camps, including Auschwitz, while the second part describes his interpretation of his experiences, which he codifies into a helpful model.

Frankl famously said: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

And so, we return to the theme of choices.

Frankl said that we all have an ability to respond (response-ability) to things that happen to us. That power of choice is what he referred to as "the last of the human freedoms." However, in making those choices he identified four elements that assist us in ensuring that our choices are intentional, and good.

Self-Awareness: This allows us to recognise our feelings and to manage our emotions. Helping young people to identify what they are feeling and how those emotions affect them is an important starting point in them taking responsibility for their decisions.

Conscience: This helps us to consider what we should do. Helping children to think through the ethical and moral perspectives of a decision is important, and engaging with our conscience helps in that. If "conscience is the inner voice which warns us someone may be looking" (H.L. Mencken) then a conscientious person makes sure that if others are watching, they approve of what they see!

Imagination: This is about being creative in envisioning the outcome that we hope for. Human beings are blessed with the ability to imagine something that does not yet exist and in doing so we can work through different scenarios in our minds eye, intentionally considering different options and imagining their likely outcomes.

Independent Will: This asks the question 'how do YOU want to respond'? This takes all the above and integrates them into an outcome for which we can take full responsibility – and then we commit and see it through.

It is a powerful model and a constructive way in which young people feel empowered to make choices – and ultimately it teaches them to take responsibility – because they are able to choose their response.

So, whilst we believe strongly that much of character development comes from experience, there are certain things that we can intentionally do which may enhance or accelerate the learning that comes from those experiences.

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

In Martin Seligman's book 'Flourish' he dedicates a significant amount of time to the concept of character strengths. Seligman is popularly known as the father of Positive Psychology, a branch of psychology that looks at pre-emptive positive mental health. He highlights the significance of recognising our strengths, and playing to our strengths, as being key to our mental well-being.

The idea that playing to our strengths is good for us is not novel. We know that if we do things that we are good at and which we enjoy (and often there is a strong correlation between the two) that it requires far less energy – mental and physical – than doing something that we find difficult, or that does not come naturally to us.

From quite an early age, children learn what they are good at and what they find difficult, but they seldom develop a literacy to describe their character strengths until much later in life. I have interviewed hundreds of pupils for scholarships over the years and one of the standard questions is: what is your greatest character strength. Invariably they want to tell me what they are good at; things like maths or singing or tennis. When I nudge them towards their character rather than their skills, they will think quite hard and usually come up with something like kindness or friendliness. Both are admirable traits, but the low range of vocabulary around this subject is notable.

One of the things we try to do as part of our Character lessons is to give pupils the opportunity to explore their character strengths. We use Seligman's free online test called the VIA Character Strengths for Children, although with staff we have used the professional package offered by Gallup's Strengthfinders.

I always enjoy the lesson where the pupils do their online assessment. The feedback they get ranks 24 different strengths in order and they always check their top five and then scan their lowest scoring one. We are often far more fascinated by our weaknesses than our strengths!

Sometimes there is a bit of anxiety involved around their strengths. Some strengths appear to be a bit sexier than others! Who wouldn't want 'Courage'? And is 'Forgiveness' really a strength? 'Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence'. What does that even mean?

There is always the debate about whether character strengths are the product of nurture or nature and the prevalence of 'Humour' and 'Gratitude' as two of the more common traits suggest that there is a degree of nurture involved. Young people value humour almost above all else and they know that they are fortunate to have the opportunities we have at Blundell's, hence the gratitude.

Usually, it does take a bit of thought before the realisation dawns that they do have a 'Love of Learning' or that they are 'Hopeful and Optimistic'. Explaining that not everyone finds 'Forgiveness' easy, or that your 'Sense of Justice' may not be universal, leads to young people

beginning to recognise their uniqueness. They also quickly start to notice when they are using their strengths. As with all strengths, the more we use them, the more proficient we become, and the greater the differentiating benefit we derive from them. The first point though, is recognition and awareness, then follows skilful use and implementation.

There is one further lesson to be learned from character strengths and that is that most of our weaknesses are the shadow to our strengths. The person who is a great optimist may struggle to hear and respond appropriately to someone who is a bit more pessimistic, and may not heed the warnings. Someone who is very forgiving may find it hard to take a stance when people let them down repeatedly. The danger is that life is perceived as a journey where the purpose is simply to acquire strengths and discard weaknesses. Whereas it is, of course, much more nuanced and subtle than that.

THE SUPERCAR VS THE SAILING BOAT

Some people see life as being comparable to driving a car, and success being measured by how far and how fast you travel in your allotted time on earth. According to this theory, a powerful engine and an aerodynamic vehicle are the key ingredients of success. Of course, that analogy works best if the road is straight and smooth and, preferably, wide. In this instance, putting your foot on the pedal and pressing down hard is pretty effective. However, the reality is that the road is seldom straight or smooth, and at times it can be narrow. Rather inconvenient, there may well be other cars on the road too. The powerful aerodynamic supercar may become more of a hindrance than a help if the terrain changes.

I find a much more helpful analogy is that of a sailing boat. The task in life is to learn to become an excellent sailor. The boat is obviously important, but much more important is the ability of the sailor to utilise the instruments that will help them stay on course. Intelligent responses to changes in the information means staying ahead of the winds and the currents. Having a good, strong boat helps, but critically, a good sailor uses the wind and the currents to their advantage. The sailor knows just how their sail needs to be set in order to capture the wind.

To me, character education is about teaching young people to become outstanding sailors: adaptable, courageous, wise, resourceful and generous.

CONCLUSION

What is it all for? What is the point?

Pope Francis puts it very well:

“Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself, and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are born to help each other.”

We develop good character to be a blessing to others and to make a positive difference to the world we live in. Good character leading to better choices result in more positive outcomes.

And then there is this, from Brigadier General Joshua Chamberlain, who was speaking at the dedication of the memorial at the Battle of Gettysburg, some twenty years after the event. He said:

“We know not of the future and cannot plan for it much. But we can hold our spirits and our bodies so pure and high, we may cherish such thoughts and such ideals, and dream such dreams of lofty purpose, that we can determine and know what manner of men we will be whenever and wherever the hour strikes, that calls to noble action.”

(Joshua Chamberlain’s Address for the 20th Maine Monument at Gettysburg, October 3, 1889)

The future path of our children’s lives is unpredictable, but we all desire for them to be equipped to deal with whatever comes their way. We want them to navigate life with a clear moral compass, guided by integrity, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to doing what is right. This is Character.



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT REVIEW: EVIDENCE INFORMED PRACTICE AT BLUNDELL'S

by Emma Weaver

1 - INTRODUCTION

The concept of “evidence informed practice” is not new (Weiss, 1979) in education, and research has highlighted the significance of its role in the context of teacher development (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Brown and Zhang (2017) see evidence-informed schools as those engaged in academic research and their own action research interventions. Conversely, action research is seen to encourage reflection through a cyclical process of implementing an intervention and measuring the impact, so that teachers can develop their practice on their own terms (Allen & Calhoun, 1998).

At Blundell’s, this has been addressed in our revision of the appraisal process. What started as discussion at staff forums, became a guiding focus for what has now become the Professional Development Review (PDR). The core notion of this is that teachers engage in reflective practice and educational research alongside this. Teaching staff at Blundell’s conduct small scale interventions and observe its impact on students. Through this reflection, teachers will continue to develop their practice, improving the experience for our students.

2 - WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Clear benefits can be found in the literature around evidence-informed practice in schools. For example, Sharp et al. (2005) argue that when schools make evidence-informed practice a part of their strategic vision, it positively impacts recruitment. For the teacher, it is a powerful way of developing their autonomy and increases self-efficacy (Mertler, 2019), as they are actively involved in their own professional development (Papanastasiou & Karagiorgi, 2019), which, has a significant impact on teachers’ sense of empowerment (Colucci-Gray et al., 2013). This can enable teachers to develop their leadership skills, as horizontal collaboration rather than hierarchical structures, enable staff to feel empowered to take on more responsibility (Dinham, 2009). Overall, these benefits can be passed on to our classes, as staff explore new ideas to help maximise the learning experience for students.

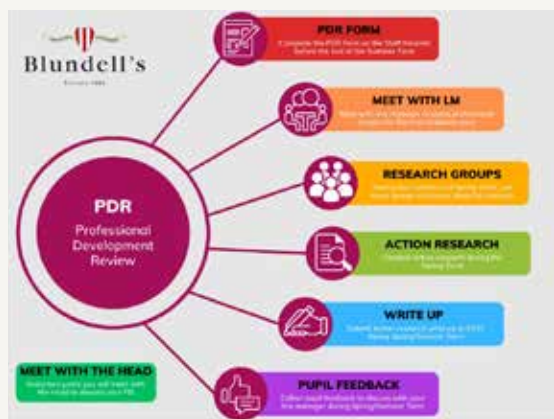


FIGURE 1: THE ELEMENTS OF THE
BLUNDELL’S STAFF APPRAISAL
PROCESS, KNOWN AS THE PDR

That is not to overlook the fact that implementing evidence-informed practice in schools can be challenging, and one of the key drawbacks is that teachers are hesitant to engage with “research” (Mertler, 2017). Hancock (1997) argues teachers may experience ‘imposter syndrome’ and be reluctant to read academic journals or conduct their own research. This might imply however, that through the ownership of research engagement, some of this can be counteracted.

3 - WHAT HAPPENS AT BLUNDELL’S?

The favourable evidence on evidence-informed practice, has been key in the development of the PDR as an appraisal process. While reformulating what staff appraisal should look like, it became apparent that a driving aim was to support staff in the development of reflective practice, and that use of educational research would be one way that this could happen. Staff are encouraged to explore the science of learning, before designing their action research projects and writing them up.

As part of the PDR, staff also meet with colleagues who have similar research interests, allowing for greater collaboration across departments. Action research projects are conducted as one part of the PDR and usually take the form of smallscale interventions, although may also feature a teachers’ reflections on an area of interest. In recent years staff have looked at a range of interest areas including the impact of regular retrieval practice quizzes on performance in mock exams, methods of increasing engagement and designing inclusive schemes of work.



FIGURE 2: THREE VOLUMES INTO THE BLUNDELL'S RESEARCH JOURNAL

This research has been collated and edited to become the “Blundell’s Research Journal”, which is shared internally for staff to access ideas of good practice. In addition to this, there has been a greater emphasis on evidence-informed practice during in-service education and training (INSET) sessions and therefore staff are more aware of research into areas such as retrieval practice, executive function or metacognition. The results of this have the potential for significant fruit in the work of Blundell’s teaching staff and students.

4 - CONCLUSIONS

The notion of being an evidence-informed school is certainly appealing when one considers the research. The Brown and Zhang (2017) definition of ‘evidence-informed schools’ as those engaged in academic research and their own interventions, is something the PDR has looked to do by having staff conduct small-scale research projects as a way of developing reflective teaching practice, integrated within the appraisal. The work of Dewey (1933) and Schon (2017), have instrumentally “contributed to the understanding of reflective practice and its benefits in a variety of contexts and as Hatton and Smith (1995) point out, reflective practice has provided the framework for many teacher training programmes.

Blundell’s School is fortunate to have a thoughtful and reflective staff body, who want the best for the pupils that they work with. The PDR has created an opportunity for this to be preserved in a tangible way through the Blundell’s Research Journal and allows for a community of teacher researchers to grow.

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SUPPORTING TEENAGERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN MANAGING THE ONLINE AND OFFLINE WORLD

by Matt Radley

FOREWORD

Before I start, I feel it is necessary to include what some might term a ‘trigger-warning’: the first half of this essay is, I realise having written it, fairly gloomy. I thought about rewriting parts of it to change the tone, but in the end I have decided against it. Particularly when it comes to social media, I think we owe it to ourselves to be very clear about the harmful impact that this new technology has had on teenagers, and on society, in the almost two decades since it first emerged. This is not a universal experience, of course. Nothing ever is. Just as social media has had an adverse impact on some children and their families, others have sailed through relatively unscathed. I would contend, however, that most users have experienced some negative effects (often significant) while purely positive experiences are rare. So while there is justifiable cause for gloom, I also want to reassure you that the second half of the essay moves towards causes for optimism. In particular I will explore how proactive strategies - ranging from regulatory measures to community-led efforts - are beginning to make a difference, and will also consider ways in which we as adults can provide effective support and guidance to young people. So please do bear with me; my hope is that by setting out a clear understanding of the serious problems we have faced, and continue to face, the ways in which we can best support our children will sit in their proper context, and be the more understandable for it.

AN ‘ANXIOUS GENERATION’?

In the Spring of 2024 a book was published which not only caught the imagination of the public, but which also seemed to capture the zeitgeist of growing concern around the impact of social media on teenagers and young people. The book was called *The Anxious Generation*, by psychologist Jonathan Haidt, and before we go any further it is worth outlining the key arguments contained within it: in many ways they provide a neat summary of the challenges and issues facing young people – and their parents – in today’s world.

Haidt begins by presenting data that indicates a sharp increase in anxiety, depression and selfharm among teenagers from around 2010, and suggests that this coincides exactly with the widespread adoption of smartphones. He then moves on to present a two-pronged argument to explain this more fully. First, Haidt argues that children have had their ‘offline’ lives regulated too tightly; that the unstructured play through which children learn resilience has become increasingly removed from their lives by parents and educators who have become overprotective in their desire to remove risk from children’s lives. The second strand of Haidt’s overall theme is that at the same time as we have become overprotective of children’s offline world, we have effectively left them almost completely unprotected in their online lives. The immense resources of major technology companies, combined with a delayed response from parents and educators, means that children have been exposed to what Haidt refers to as ‘foundational harms’: social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation and addiction. In short, *The Anxious Generation* makes a very clear argument that unfettered social media and smartphone use, coupled with a culture of ‘safetyism’ in the real world, is increasingly leaving teenagers and young people ill-equipped to develop resilience, navigate challenges and maintain their mental wellbeing in an increasingly digital world.

It is important to note that Haidt’s arguments have not been without criticism. For example Candice Odgers, writing in *Nature*, argued that in associating the rise in teenage mental health problems with smartphones Haidt was confusing causation for correlation, and further accused him of ‘fear mongering’ and distracting from the ‘real causes’ of youth mental health struggles. Other criticism, for example from David Wallace-Wells writing in *The New York Times*, was that Haidt was over-simplifying a hugely complex and nuanced issue. Nonetheless, the arguments made by Haidt clearly resonated with many, and his book not only found itself atop many bestseller lists but also became the subject of conversations in school common rooms, at playground gates and at dinner parties. You don’t need to be a social psychologist to see the impact—often stark, sometimes worrying—that phones have on teens and young adults. Haidt’s arguments, whether oversimplified or not, certainly resonated with me both as a parent and as someone who has spent the past decade-and-a-half working with, and supporting children and teenagers.

SOCIAL MEDIA: THE REALITY

I want to state clearly here that I am no Luddite, and I will explore the beneficial aspects of online life and the internet later in this essay. There is, however, no doubt in my mind that unrestricted access to the internet, to smartphones, and to social media in particular, has the potential to be hugely harmful. In some respects the key word here is ‘unrestricted’ for, as we shall see, so much of the solution, if such a thing exists, is based around the twin concepts of boundaries and moderation. I shall return to those themes shortly. It is, however, worth dwelling a little on what social media is, and why it exists. At their heart, social media companies are businesses and, like any other business, they exist to make money. What is different about these companies is the way in which they make money. Here is not the place to examine this in any great detail, but in essence social media companies make money through two methods. Firstly, by collecting vast reams of data on the individuals that use them which can then be sold or monetised (or both) and, secondly, by hooking users so that they use the sites and apps as much and as regularly as possible, which in turn drives advertising revenue. In recent years, I have observed that if one were a

talented psychologist, the way to transform one's skills into a lucrative career is no longer working in private healthcare but in technology companies. Such companies pay huge amounts of money to teams of highly skilled psychologists and other experts to make sure that their apps, or their algorithms, or their games, are as addictive as possible. This all sounds very dystopian, but it is important that we are under no illusions as to the challenge we face as a society and, equally as important, the challenge our children face when they begin to engage in an online world. Put simply, while it might be frustrating to watch one's child engage in multiple hours of screen time, or observe them become increasingly glued to their phone, we simply cannot blame them for it. Social media platforms and games are designed to exploit human psychology to maximise user engagement. For example, they employ features such as variable rewards (likes, notifications, and comments, for instance) that trigger dopamine release in the brain's reward pathways, reinforcing the desire to continue using the platform; a mechanism similar to how addictive substances affect the brain. Additionally, the endless stream of content, 'infinite scrolling' and personalized algorithms keep users engaged by providing continuous, unpredictable rewards, making it challenging to disengage.

In this context it is unsurprising that by almost any metric, the extent to which teenagers and young people have been consumed by smartphone and social media use has increased to a staggering degree. A recent study by Ofcom found that 99% of children spend time online, with nine in ten owning a mobile phone by the age of 11. Additionally, 93% of UK teenagers aged 12-15 use social media regularly, with 42% admitting to checking their accounts multiple times an hour. The same survey found that three-quarters of social media users aged between eight and 17 have their own account or profile on at least one major platform and, despite the fact that most social media platforms set a minimum age requirement of 13, around six in ten children aged 8 to 12 are still signed up with their own profiles.

CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM?

Ok, enough with the gloom. In fact, there are reasons for optimism. The very existence of this debate in itself is significant: five years ago, let alone ten, these issues were neither widely discussed nor fully understood. Yet the source of optimism is not just that they are being debated, but that these debates are reflective of a world which has now caught onto the dangers and problems associated with unrestricted internet and social media use, especially as posed to teenagers. In his book, Haidt argues that one key strand of tackling these concerns is the role of central governments, and we are already starting to see countries such as Australia, Germany and France impose increasingly strident regulation on tech and social media companies. Even here in the UK the Online Safety Act is now in its implementation phase, with social media companies currently having to undertake assessments as to how they will better protect children from online harm. While there is still much debate as to how effective such action will be, and indeed about whether governments have taken the right approach, on a fundamental level this activity does represent a step-change in terms of the state's involvement and monitoring of social media and tech companies.

If 'top-down' intervention is one reason for cautious optimism, so too is the growth of 'ground-up' movements. Groups such as 'Smartphone Free Childhood' have had significant success not just in achieving mainstream media attention, but also in educating large numbers of parents about the dangers of unfettered smartphone use. As a result, it seems likely that today's pre-teens will receive smartphones later than those just a few years older, partly because parents now feel more confident that their child won't be the 'only one' facing the perceived social exclusion of being without one. More and more schools are making their campuses 'phone-free' environments and, further, it is clear that phone companies are responding to this trend. The emergence of so-called 'dumb phones' is the best example of this. Dumb phones offer very limited functionality (generally just calling and texting), thereby allowing parents to benefit from the sense of safety and security that comes from being able to contact their child, and be contacted, yet without the additional problems that come from also giving them access to the internet and social media.

The separation of the concept of a 'phone' and a 'smartphone' is an important development that it is easy to overlook, yet which I sense will be of real significance in allowing parents to frame conversations with their children: "we can appreciate that when you start senior school there are good reasons for you to have a phone, but you won't need a smartphone until you are older" is a conversation that parents will arguably find easier now than would have been the case five years ago.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

If it is clear that one of the most significant ways we can support children is by restricting their access to social media until an age when they are better able to manage it, it is also becoming apparent that parents do have a significant role to play in helping their children as they begin to navigate and manage their online activity. There is no single way in which this can be done, but if there is one point to take away from this essay, it is of the importance of keeping open communication with your children on these issues. Engaging in regular discussions with your teenager about their online activities helps foster trust and openness, encouraging them to share both positive and negative experiences. Also helpful can be the act of collaboratively establishing rules regarding screen time and appropriate online behaviour (such as designating tech-free times during meals or before bedtime), which in turn can promote better sleep and more in person interactions. It is also important to discuss the need for safeguarding personal information, ensuring children understand privacy settings on different platforms and the risks of oversharing. Encouraging critical thinking about the content they consume and share, as well as discussing the difference between online personas and reality, is also important, and can help them navigate social comparisons and mitigate potential negative impacts on self-esteem. As much as these steps can be hugely supportive for a child navigating online lives, we must also accept that nothing we do can completely remove risk, and as such parents should also ensure that they are alert to signs that a child may have been exposed to harmful online content or behaviour. Be attentive to any changes in your child's behaviour, such as withdrawal, anxiety, or disrupted sleep, as these may indicate they have encountered disturbing content online. If they come across upsetting material, provide a safe and supportive space for them to express their feelings, reassuring them that it is okay to talk about what they have seen. Encourage them to use reporting mechanisms on platforms to flag inappropriate or harmful content, and make them aware of services like the UK Safer Internet Centre's "Report Harmful Content" tool, or the CEOP button which is found on many websites. If their well-being is significantly affected, seeking support from professionals or organizations such as Young Minds or the NSPCC can provide additional guidance and reassurance. Links to all of these services can be found at the end of this essay.

Something else that has become increasingly clear is the importance of having clear boundaries and restrictions in relation to online activity and social media use. To a degree, the specifics of these boundaries do not matter; they simply need to exist. A recent report by the Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology explored this in more detail, and found that, among other things, restricting social media use led to

significant reductions in depression and perceived loneliness among participants, as well as producing beneficial effects on attention spans and the ability to focus at school. There is plenty of advice available online as to exactly how parents can place appropriate boundaries, but one common suggestion is to draw up a ‘contract’, to which all of the family agree to abide (adults included!). This can cover aspects such as phone-free areas of the house, appropriate amounts of time to spend on screens, and parents having access to social media logins (something that can be adapted as children get older).

TWO CLOSING THOUGHTS

There are two final points which it is vital to keep in mind in our talk of restrictions and boundaries. The first is that we must remember why we are doing this, and the answer is not solely that unrestricted access to the internet, and to social media can be harmful (although this is important). We must also remember that we are trying to free-up time and space for children to be children; to spend time with their friends, to play outside, to engage in sports or other hobbies, to be silly, and to learn about the world by experiencing it. This is, of course, the second key argument made by Haidt in his book. Therefore it is crucial that all involved – children and adults alike – understand why boundaries in the online world are so important. Not just to promote online safety, but also to promote offline life. It is so easy to look at our children and wonder where the little toddler went, and to marvel at how grown-up they appear. We must, though, remember that they are still young, and as their parents one of the best things we can do for them is to give them the time and space to enjoy acting as children. The second point of which we must not lose sight is that there are a great many benefits to online activity, and to social media: provided it is used with appropriate boundaries. Social media undoubtedly enables teenagers to maintain and strengthen relationships with friends and family members, regardless of geographical barriers, and can also provide important avenues for self expression and identity formation. Additionally, online communities offer support networks where young people can discuss challenges and seek advice, fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. More broadly, the internet is a vast resource for educational and skill development, enabling teenagers to access information, tutorials and courses that supplement traditional learning. It also provides a creative outlet for young people to express themselves through blogs, videos, art and music, and this type of creative engagement can boost self-esteem and provide a sense of accomplishment. It is essential that we therefore retain perspective when we consider the internet, and social media. If we fail to recognise the undoubted benefits that it can bring, we not only risk denying these advantages to our children, but also run the risk of being seen by our children simply as dinosaurs who do not understand the world they live in, and that is no basis for constructive and positive conversation.

CONCLUSION

It is consideration of the above which informs how we approach these key issues at Blundell’s. Perhaps most obviously this can be seen in our recent move towards a phone-free campus (which came alongside our BYOD policy), along with placing more restrictions on internet access during the school day. We recognise that technology can offer many benefits and advantages, and we want to ensure pupils retain access to these. However, we are also now clear that unbridled access to the internet can not only distract from academic study in a learning environment, but can also bring many of the harms and dangers outlined in this essay. This understanding also informs our approach to software management and network monitoring, and also our significant investment in powerful Wi-Fi: our view is that we want our Wi-Fi network to be as strong as possible so that pupils want to use it, but which in turn will allow us to have much better control over what they access, and when. The other major area in which this understanding informs our school practice is in PSHE, where education about online safety is not only underpinned by the latest research and understanding, but is also constantly evolving to make sure that the education we offer to pupils in this area is accurate, relevant, and effective.

In the final analysis, while the benefits of online engagement and technology are significant, so too are the inherent problems and dangers. We must provide clear boundaries for our children, so as to move away from the concept of unrestricted time online, and of unfettered access to all the internet has to offer. Any such boundaries do not need to be fixed and can change and develop as your child gets older. However, ultimately the goal is to encourage a balance between screen time and offline activity. Encouraging teenagers to participate in physical exercise, face-to-face interaction and hobbies outside the digital realm is not only an important (and easy-to-understand) rationale for limiting online time, but will also contribute to a child’s development in a significant manner. Keeping an open and transparent dialogue with your child will allow you to navigate the journey together, and enable you to support them in harnessing the positive aspects of the digital world, while mitigating the potential drawbacks and undoubted harms that exist online.

At Blundell’s, we recognise the profound influence social media has on young people, both positive and negative. That’s why we are committed to proactive, evolving strategies that equip our pupils with the tools to navigate the digital world safely and thoughtfully. Through education, clear policies, and a strong partnership with parents, we strive to ensure that our pupils develop not only resilience but also a balanced, healthy relationship with technology: one that empowers rather than diminishes them.

USEFUL LINKS:

NSPCC: Keeping Children Safe Online

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/>

UK Safer Internet Centre: Parents and Carers

<https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/parents-and-carers>

Parents Protect: Internet Safety

<https://www.parentsprotect.co.uk/internet-safety.htm>

Childline: Staying Safe Online

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/stayingsafe-online/>

Young Minds

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/>

CEOP (Child Protection and Online Protection (a branch of the UK Police)

<https://www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre/>



THE POWER OF A DIVERSE TEAM: A REFLECTION ON COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

by Tammy Winsley

INTRODUCTION

As a Drama teacher, I have been able to appreciate the benefits of collaborative work throughout my career. Theatre, as with many other art forms, is inherently collective, relying on actors, directors, designers and technicians working together to bring a shared vision to life. But it wasn't until I expanded my knowledge of diversity and inclusion that I began to see collaboration and teamwork through a new lens; recognising not just the inherent benefits of teamwork, but the opportunities (and fruitful challenges) that diverse perspectives offer. This led me to reflect more intentionally on how different ways of thinking fuel creativity and innovation, solve problems and achieve deeper engagement within a group. As Bart Wielenga argued in his thoughts about character education, schools exist not just to help pupils achieve good grades but to prepare young people for the complexities of the world they will enter.

Reading Matthew Syed's *Rebel Ideas* helped me realise that cultivating cognitive diversity – the integration of different perspectives – prepares pupils not only for the challenges of adulthood but also for making a meaningful impact in the world.

THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF TEAMWORK

But first, I will start with teamwork. Collaboration in schools is often framed in terms of academic achievement, and rightly so. Studies have shown that pupils in collaborative learning environments often achieve better academic outcomes, an average of five months' additional progress (Foundation, 2021). Beyond this, the social aspect of group work makes learning more rewarding for vulnerable pupils, fostering inclusion and support (Williams, 2024). Working in this way also improves critical thinking skills by 30% and increases retention rates by 25% (Kumar, 2017). However, this is just the measurable impact; the true value of collaboration goes far deeper and that speaks to the vital importance of human connection the thing we missed the most during lockdown.

Teamwork develops essential life skills beyond academics, which is why it features on STEM Learning's top 10 employability skills list (and most CVs). The ability to collaborate effectively is essential not only in professional settings but also in personal relationships, good citizenship and schools. When learners work closely with one another, they learn to compromise, navigate disagreements, refine their ability to articulate ideas and analyse and evaluate different viewpoints before arriving at their own judgement.

I have touched on the benefits of teamwork in developing life skills, but collaboration also enhances academic outcomes. The old adage of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts illustrates the power of a team, as does the analogy of an ant colony where each individual contributes to a larger system. This concept has been around for millennia, but it is becoming increasingly important in the modern world, as Professor Brian Uzzi of Northwestern University, Illinois points out, "The most significant trend in human creativity is the shift from individuals to teams, and the gap between teams and individuals is increasing with time."

NOT ALL TEAMS ARE EQUAL

In academic research, the percentage of papers with two or more authors rose from 19% in 1960 to 74% in 2018 and these papers tend to have a higher impact. By 2010, a team was three times more likely to produce a highly cited paper than a solo author (Jones, 2021). But not all teams are equally effective; the composition of a team matters just as much as collaboration itself. This is where cognitive diversity becomes critical. Teams that combine diverse perspectives, knowledge and skills, produce more novel and impactful research and are far more innovative than those that think alike – their 'collective intelligence' exceeds individual efforts.

Although diverse teams are more effective, they can also create discomfort – whether in a classroom or a workplace. Our instinct is to gravitate toward those who think like us. There is a certain ease in surrounding ourselves with people who share our perspectives, who confirm our ideas and validate our viewpoints. After all, 'birds of a feather flock together.' While this familiarity may feel reassuring, it does not necessarily lead to the best outcomes. This idea was explored in a study led by Professor Katherine Phillips at Columbia Business School. Teams were tasked with solving a murder mystery by analysing complex information from alibis, witness statements and suspect lists. One type of team was composed entirely of friends and another composed of three friends and one outsider. Interestingly, teams that included an outsider consistently outperformed those made up of only friends, identifying the correct suspect 75% of the time, compared to only 54% for the all-friends teams. The presence of an outsider brought in a different perspective, forcing the team to consider a wider range of possibilities and avoid 'groupthink'. However, when asked about their confidence in their answers, the all-friends teams were 50% more likely to express certainty in their choice. They also reported feeling more comfortable and enjoying the activity more than the teams with an outsider (Phillips, 2014). This study highlights an uncomfortable truth – while homogeneity may feel comfortable, it often leads to stagnation rather than discovery.

This has direct implications for education. Pupils often prefer working with those they already know and trust. If they form groups outside their comfort zones, they are encouraged to engage with different viewpoints, question assumptions and challenge their own thinking. Imagine

a team of 10. They are all asked to bring 10 different ideas to the table. In a team where the members all think alike, many of those ideas will overlap, leading to repetition rather than innovation, resulting in just 10 ideas, albeit framed in slightly different ways. Now, picture a team of 10 individuals who each approach the problem from a different angle. Suddenly, they have the potential to generate 100 unique ideas, drawing from varied experiences and insights. A team composed of individuals who think the same way is only ever likely to reach one answer (which may or may not be the right one), but a cognitively diverse team is more likely to generate multiple possibilities, deeper analysis and richer discussions.

Beyond problem-solving, cognitive diversity also plays a crucial role in creativity. Studies have shown that in an education setting, encouraging pupils to engage with perspectives outside their own enhances their ability to think critically and develop novel ideas. (Kurtzberg, 2005) This is particularly important as we prepare pupils for careers in an increasingly globalised world, where understanding different cultural viewpoints is essential. As Matt Radley highlights in his essay on Supporting Young People in Managing the Online and Offline World, social media often promotes rapid consumption of information, which discourages deep reflection and critical analysis. This reinforces the importance of actively teaching pupils to engage thoughtfully with diverse viewpoints. Without such skills, young people risk becoming passive consumers of information but by ensuring that they are consistently exposed to multiple perspectives, we can equip them with the tools to challenge assumptions, refine their own viewpoints and navigate complexity with greater flexibility.

DIVERSITY OR “SUPER-DUPER”?

There is a misconception that the trade-off between excellence and diversity is a zero-sum equation. The American Supreme Court Judge, Justice Antonin Scalia once argued that prioritising diversity over talent could undermine success, putting it in quite simple terms that there is a choice between diversity or being “super-duper”. The diversity that Justice Scalia was referring to is demographic or identity diversity. However, my thesis in this essay is about cognitive diversity. The two are of course linked – our own backgrounds and characteristics inevitably influence our perspectives. A psychology experiment (Masuda, 2001) explored cultural differences in perception by comparing how American and Japanese participants processed visual information. Participants watched animated vignettes of underwater scenes featuring fish, small animals, plants and rocks and the participants were asked to report what they observed in the scenes. Americans tended to focus on the most prominent objects in the scene, such as the large, brightly coloured fish. While their Japanese counterparts paid more attention to the context and relationships between objects. They were more likely to mention background elements and the interactions between the fish and their environment. This research highlights how cultural backgrounds can shape cognitive processes and the way we perceive and interpret the world around us: Western societies tend to be more individualistic whereas Japanese culture is more interdependent.

While demographic diversity alone does not guarantee cognitive diversity, varied lived experiences influence the way individuals approach problems. Research shows that gender-diverse teams are nearly 10% more likely to produce novel work than same gender teams (Duncan J. Watts, 2021). Whilst individual excellence is “super-duper” important for linear tasks like winning a race or mathematical calculations, I don’t believe that to be true for the more complex problems that we currently face and our children will continue to face.

German psychologist Karl Duncker introduced the concept of ‘analogical reasoning’, which illustrates how problem-solving can benefit from cross-fertilised thinking. To illustrate his concept, he suggested the following scenario. A doctor needs to destroy a malignant tumour using rays. High-intensity rays can destroy the tumour but also harm healthy tissue. Low-intensity rays are harmless to healthy tissue but ineffective against the tumour. What type of procedure might be used to destroy the tumour with the rays and at the same time avoid destroying the healthy tissue? When I have presented this thought puzzle to teenagers, most cannot find a solution (apart from one who came up with the idea of inserting a tube that would “push aside” any delicate organs and end at the tumour so the rays could sent down the tube - genius!). But the majority are not alone in not being able to solve it - 90% of people can’t. Now consider this analogy: a General needs to capture a fortress surrounded by mines. Large forces trigger the mines, but small groups can pass safely. The General divides her army into small groups that converge on the fortress simultaneously, thereby capturing it. Having read the story of the fortress, more than 70% of people found a way to save the patient. (Loewenstein, Thompson, & Gentner, 1999) This thought puzzle highlights how diverse perspectives and analogical reasoning can lead to innovative solutions. By considering a medical conundrum through a military perspective, it can jog new insights, new metaphors and new solutions. The same principle applies in classrooms, where young people from diverse backgrounds bring unique perspectives that enrich the learning experience for everyone.

THE RISKS OF SAMENESS, THE REWARDS OF DIFFERENCE

The consequences of failing to embrace cognitive diversity can be significant. History provides stark examples of where homophily has led to costly blind spots. In his book, Syed explores how the failure to prevent the 9/11 attacks could be attributed to a lack of cognitive diversity within the CIA. It is important to note, that this failure is not attributed to any individual agent who were all experts in their field, but rather to the lack of diverse perspectives in the Agency that meant that critical warning signs were overlooked. In an interview years after the attack, former deputy director of the CIA Carmen Medina stated, “If almost everyone has one world view, we are not in a position to understand our adversaries and anticipate what they are going to do.”

The concept of the ‘problem space’ in diversity science refers to the range of ideas, perspectives and knowledge relevant to solving a particular problem. A diverse group collectively covers a broader problem space, allowing for more angles and potential solutions, leading to better decision-making and innovation (Syed, Rebel Ideas, 2019). This principle isn’t limited to intelligence failures. Cognitive diversity has also proven valuable in the sporting ‘field’, where diverse perspectives have driven improvements at the highest level. The English Football Association’s Technical Advisory Board was established in 2016 after years of disappointing results. The FA deliberately brought in experts from journalism, IT, the military and even rugby rather than exclusively football specialists. This decision was based on the understanding that a fresh perspective was needed to break the cycle of poor performance in tournaments. That decision brought cries from die-hard fans of “where are all the football experts!” but the proof was in the pudding. Whilst it didn’t lead to football immediately “coming home” the team came fourth at 2018 World Cup and were runners-up at Euro 2020. The logical is that their new manager, Gareth Southgate WAS the expert in football, that corner of the problem space was covered. What the team needed was diverse thought, not the same thought multiplied.

AVOIDING ECHO CHAMBERS AND BLINDSPOTS

This brings me to the subject of echo chambers – environments where only one perspective is reinforced over and over again. As Leonardo da Vinci observed, “All our knowledge has its origins in our perceptions.” This insight is as relevant today as it was during the Renaissance. The way we see the world is shaped by our personal experiences, cultural backgrounds and the information we consume. Without actively seeking alternative viewpoints, we risk reinforcing our own biases rather than expanding our understanding. As Charles List highlights in his analysis of AI and education, there is a danger that algorithm-driven learning could reinforce existing biases rather than challenge them. The same risk applies in human interactions – when we are only exposed to perspectives that mirror our own, we fail to see the full complexity of an issue. This creates blind spots that make it harder to engage with alternative viewpoints (Deutsch, 2016). Cognitive diversity is, therefore, essential for counteracting these blind spots and ensuring that knowledge is enriched, not limited, by perception. This has profound implications for young people, who risk becoming entrenched in narrow ways of thinking if they are not exposed to diverse perspectives. To counter this, expanding educational content to include multiple viewpoints prevents pupils from falling into the trap of only consuming reaffirming content. History lessons, for instance that incorporate diverse perspectives encourage critical thinking. Similarly, discussions around current events should analyse multiple viewpoints rather than reinforcing a single narrative.

Diverse teams do not just produce better results; they also make fewer errors. Homogeneous groups tend to develop what Syed calls ‘collective blindness’ - when everyone in a group has similar experiences and perspectives, they miss the same blind spots. By contrast, cognitive diversity reduces this risk, allowing teams to anticipate problems more effectively and mitigate risks before they become failures.

In Bart Wielenga’s essay character education, he draws from Viktor Frankl’s concept of ‘the last human freedom’ to suggest that pupils who continually choose intellectual safety and ideological comfort risk developing intellectual complacency. If we want to prepare young people for a complex world, we must deliberately create learning environments where they are encouraged to engage with cognitive dissonance, critically evaluate ideas and refine their understanding through challenge rather than confirmation. In this way, avoiding intellectual silos is not just an academic necessity but a fundamental part of character development. The concept of the ‘danger of a single story’ – coined by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – highlights how limited narratives can reinforce stereotypes and narrow our understanding of the world (Adichie, 2009).

One of the ways to promote cognitive diversity in education is through curriculum diversification. A more representative curriculum, including literature, history and case studies from different cultures and experiences, fosters a richer learning environment. By ensuring that a range of voices and perspectives are included, we create opportunities for deeper engagement and critical reflection. Learning thrives in environments where voices that might otherwise be overlooked are amplified, allowing pupils to challenge assumptions and broaden their understanding of the world. In our ‘Life Through My Lens’ Chapel series, we encourage pupils to share their individual perspectives. This is particularly effective in breaking down barriers and allowing pupils to see beyond their own lived experiences and develop greater empathy, patience and adaptability.

Moreover, teachers can model cognitive diversity in their own practices. Encouraging young people to question assumptions, engage in debates and explore multiple interpretations fosters critical thinking skills that will serve them throughout their lives. In all subjects, from arts to sciences and humanities to languages, incorporating perspectives from different time periods, cultures and ideologies challenges young people to think more deeply and avoid the pitfalls of narrow thinking.

BUILDING A FUTURE-READY GENERATION

As AI reshapes the world of work, cognitive diversity is more critical than ever. As Charles List laid out in his essay, AI can process information quickly, but the “humans in the loop” have a monopoly on ingenuity, adaptability and ethical reasoning. If education focuses solely on content knowledge without fostering diverse perspectives, pupils will be illprepared for an evolving job market. Increasingly, employers are recognising the value of employees who can navigate complex, unpredictable situations. The ability to integrate different perspectives, work collaboratively, and challenge assumptions will be among the most sought-after skills in the workforce of the future. The World Economic Forum has identified critical thinking, problem-solving and creativity as the top three skills required in the workforce by 2030 (Forum, 2025) – skills that are directly linked to cognitive diversity.

What is more, cognitive diversity is essential for tackling the global challenges that will define the coming decades. Issues such as climate change, social inequality and technological ethics require solutions that incorporate multiple viewpoints and areas of expertise. Schools can equip young people with the ability to engage with these challenges in a meaningful way, ensuring that they leave education not only knowledgeable but also capable of thinking flexibly and working effectively with others.

CONCLUSION

Cognitive diversity is not just an asset – it is a necessity. In education, business and society, the ability to think differently, challenge assumptions and engage with diverse perspectives enriches our understanding and drives progress. By fostering environments where varied voices and experiences are valued, we empower young people to navigate an increasingly complex world with confidence and creativity. When we embrace cognitive diversity, we open the door to new ideas, deeper connections and transformative innovation – ensuring that the next generation is not only prepared for the future but ready to shape it.

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SCHOOL FINANCES

by Bart Wielenga

INTRODUCTION

Recent political events have focused a spotlight on independent schools. For the record, Blundell's is a registered charity, and we are a not-for-profit organisation. Any surplus that we make goes back into the school accounts. We are an educational institution, and we are also a business, in so much as the finances must be managed in such a way that the school remains viable.

At times it is difficult and even uncomfortable to reconcile the idea that a school is about giving children an outstanding education, whilst simultaneously needing to be a smartly operated business. At times there is a tension, but good education and good business do not have to be at odds with each other. A good educational offering (the product) is essential to generate revenue, and what all consumers are interested in – alongside affordability – is value. In a utilitarian sense, value is when the cost can be justified for what is received in return. A great educational offering can be better value than a lesser product at a much lower price. And parents tend to be savvy investors and therefore, like all good investors, will seek out value.

Good financial management means that investment in education (teachers, facilities, resources, etc) and efficiency in managing costs (staff, maintenance, etc) ensure an educational product that parents believe is worth spending their money on. This paper is intended to be generic in principle, but where appropriate I will use our experiences at Blundell's as the case study. All charities are required to display their financial accounts on the Charity Commission website, where they are available to the public.

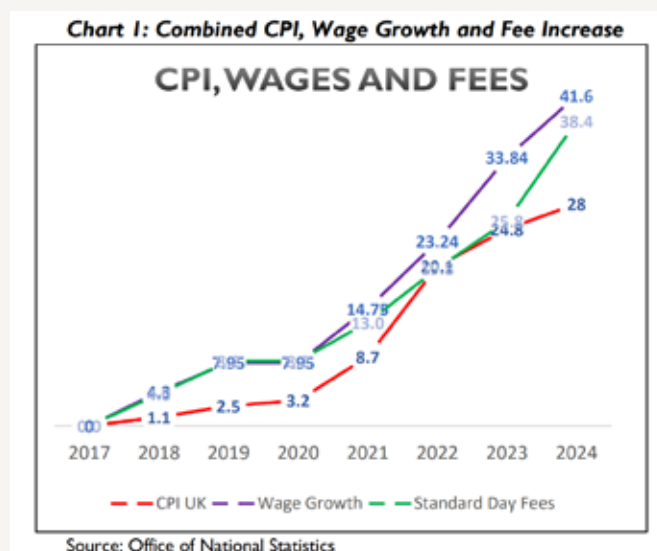
THE ECONOMY: A NECESSARY CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

It is worth keeping in mind that over the past 7 or so years the macro-economic environment has been extraordinarily unstable. Britain officially left the EU on the 31st of January 2020, and we entered our first Covid lockdown in March of that same year. When the war in Ukraine broke out in February 2022, we were still emerging from a post-Covid world, and we were trying to figure out the ramifications of Brexit. We also experienced a period of significant inflation caused by the spike in energy prices triggered by the war in Ukraine.

During this period of time, we have seen four Conservative Prime Ministers – including an economically catastrophic cameo from Liz Truss – and a change of Government. The rest of the world has also faced considerable economic upheavals, and we wait to see, with fascination and apprehension, what may emerge from the new Presidency across the Atlantic. It is not unreasonable to say that this has been a period of unprecedented instability and uncertainty, and not just for Independent schools.

A school like Blundell's is not immune to all these matters and both our revenue generating capabilities (mainly through fees), as well as management of our cost base, are profoundly affected by these macroeconomic events.

CHART 1 SHOWS THREE RELATED SETS OF DATA: CPI (A MEASURE OF INFLATION), WAGE GROWTH ACROSS THE UK, AND FEE INCREASES AT BLUNDELL'S.



The Consumer Price Index (CPI) is an indicator of the rate at which prices of a standardised basket of goods goes up from one period to another. We generally refer to CPI as inflation. Over the period since the beginning of 2017, prices have increased by 28%. In the UK, inflation is targeted to be within a percentage point of a 2% target, but whilst that target was broadly achieved until 2020, the impact of Brexit, Covid and the war in Ukraine (and its impact on energy prices) has meant we have deviated from the target, and successive governments have struggled to bring it back.

Chart 1 clearly shows how, after a period of stability, prices escalated rapidly between 2020 and 2022 and have since stabilised again to a more regular level nearer to the target of 2%.

Inflation has had a major effect on things like energy prices and food costs. We have largely been protected from the worst of the energy spikes through long term contracts and because of pre-emptively investing in solar power and greater insulation (which has been made possible through the Energy Surcharge). However, we were not able to avoid the huge increase in food costs. The other factor that was considerably affected has been wages and salaries.

Chart 1 includes wage growth over the same period. Wage growth is measured as an average, so clearly not everyone is affected in the same way, but it is the standard measure of wage growth in the UK. Traditionally, there is a time lag between wage growth and CPI; high prices tend to lead to higher wages. The chart shows that wages froze during the pandemic, although just prior to that there was a period where wages grew at a considerably faster rate than CPI. Wage growth is also a driver of inflation, and one reason why inflation is not coming back down to target is because wages are still trending upwards at a rate considerably above inflation.

After Covid, when inflation kicked in, wages rose rapidly. However, when CPI settled down in 2022/23, the momentum in wages did not abate and wage growth continued even after price increases had slowed down. Whilst inflation has returned to more normal levels, wages continue to rise, and may continue to do so under the current Government whose largesse towards public sector workers might see inflation remain stubbornly above target, making it less attractive for the bank of England to lower interest rates.

In this context it is worth considering how fees at Blundell's have changed over this same period. The press is quick to point out high levels of fee increases. The current Chancellor repeatedly points to the fact that parents have 'accepted' above-inflation fee increases as a rationalisation of VAT on school fees. Clearly, as parents have kept paying the fees, a slight 20% bump won't make too much difference!

I am mindful that Chart 1 indicates Standard Day Fees and the fee changes at different parts of the school will be different, but for the sake of the illustration, I have used this segment of the school population. In Chart 1 the fee freeze during covid is evident, but the period immediately after that does have a steeper trajectory than the period immediately preceding Covid. However, the trajectory is nothing like as steep as that of the increase in prices, or the increase in wages, and the steepest trajectory of all is caused by the levying of VAT. It is worth noting that we only passed on a part of the VAT – a full VAT implementation would see an even steeper rise.

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES: OVERVIEW OF GENERIC ISSUES CONFRONTING THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SECTOR

TEACHERS' PENSION SCHEME (TPS)

In the last few years there have been some very specific challenges to school finances. The first of these came in the form of the **Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS)**. The TPS is a generous defined benefits pensions scheme to which all schools traditionally belonged. It is an attractive pension seen, in part, to compensate for relatively modest salaries in the educational sector.

In 2018 the employer contribution to the TPS was 16.48%. That figure is reviewed every 5 years, and it is generally expected to increase. However, the 43.7% increase from 16.48% to 23.68% was unexpected and unprecedented. Some schools immediately negotiated an exit from the TPS and moved to a defined contribution scheme. We made a defined contribution scheme available to our teaching staff, but understandably, not many staff took that option.

Blundell's do not typically pay much above the state level of pay. If we were to remove the TPS from the remuneration package of staff, then recruitment would become more challenging, and we would have to increase salaries considerably in order to match the total remuneration package in the state sector. Remaining in the TPS at that time cost the school around £400k per annum. In retrospect I believe that remaining in the TPS was the right thing to do, particularly as the strategy from that moment was to make it clear that any further increase in employer contributions would not be borne by the school.

In 2024 the employer contributions again went up, this time by a more modest 21%, from 23.68% to 28.68%. Staff had been well prepared for this eventuality, and when Governors announced that the school would be withdrawing from the TPS, there was little resistance, and the scheme is now closed to new joiners. Staff who chose to remain in the TPS have had to cover the increase in costs themselves. In comparison to the trauma this has caused at many other schools, where strike action and various other forms of resistance were rife, I am very proud of how this was managed at Blundell's. It is testimony to the goodwill of both Governors and teaching staff to work together to find win-win solutions. I believe this outcome is a very positive one but the cost of the increase in pensions over the past 6 years has been substantial.

COVID AND A NATIONAL LOCKDOWN

As we were working through the financial consequences of the increases in TPS costs to the school, news emerged of a virus in Wuhan, China. That was in January of 2020, and I remember our cricketers going on tour to India over the February Half Term. Soon after their return, rumours gathered strength that schools would close, and we would be going into a national lockdown. It seemed incomprehensible and I think I probably wrote to parents in my Bulletin that I did not think that a full school closure was likely.

A week before Half Term we gathered the Upper Sixth in the chapel for an impromptu farewell service, after which they packed their bags, and school was not reopened until September – and then only for a while before a second lockdown was declared in January 2021 (when the

weather was not quite as nice). Although we were able to furlough some of the support staff, the reality is that we needed teachers to keep teaching. Considering that staff pay (support and teaching) make up more than two thirds of the schools' expenses, it was not very easy to save money during lockdown. We could save on food and on energy costs, but with payroll making up such a large proportion of the costs of running the school, savings were not substantial.

Understandably, parents were reluctant to pay the full fees, and some were disappointed by the size of the fee reduction that Blundell's was able to offer. However, the cost of Covid to the school was approximately £2m. It is a substantial amount of money and equates to two years' worth of cash surpluses. We were fortunate to have a bit of headroom and some cash reserves, but it was an uncomfortable time and a costly one to the capital development ambitions of the school. Those were the cash reserves that we would have been able to spend on various projects. Some parents have expressed frustration at the lack of investment in certain facilities such as the astros, but we cannot forget the impact Covid had on our cash reserves. I imagine it would have been the same for many businesses who were in the service industries.

STAFF COSTS

Staff costs make up around two thirds of the total costs of running the school. At the Prep School it is over 70% and at the Senior School around 65%. The Prep School has lower grounds and maintenance costs and hence the difference in proportions. There are two sides to staff costs, Support Staff and Academic Staff. The National Minimum Wage was £7.50 per hour in 2017. This year it will increase to £11.44 per hour, a 52% increase. Of course, it is not just those staff on the minimum wage (cleaners, porters, etc) but also those just above it who are affected. National Insurance contributions will also increase from 13.8% to 15% with a threshold of £5,000 rather than £9,000. These are the costs that are difficult for the school to control. Our Support Staff are invaluable members of our school community and serve the school through the catering department, the grounds and gardens teams, our House matrons, as well as numerous other support functions. The cost increases have well outstripped inflation, and school fee increases.

In A Level Economics classes you learn that if the cost of labour increases, then the natural consequence is that businesses can afford to employ fewer people. We are trying to strike a balance between ensuring that our Support Staff continue to be able to provide the excellent level of service that they do, against the need to be financially prudent.

Teaching shortages in England have been well reported in the press. One of the contentious aspects of the levying of VAT on school fees is that it will allow another 6,500 teachers to be employed. Good luck in finding them! Many schools – not just those in the maintained sector – are finding it impossible to appoint qualified staff in many subject areas – especially in key subjects like Computer Science, Design Technology, Maths, Physics, Business Studies and Economics.

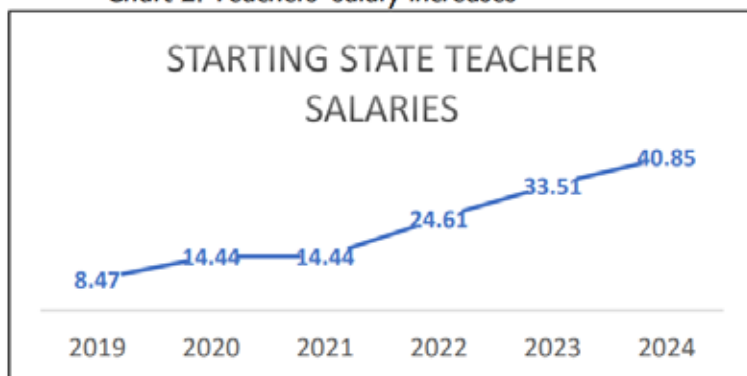
We continue to appoint fantastic staff who are not just accomplished and motivated classroom practitioners, but who also want to play an active part in boarding school life, don't mind teaching on Saturdays, and who contribute to coaching sport and running activities. Teaching at Blundell's is truly wonderful – great kids, wonderful environment, good food, etc – but it is demanding. It is 6-days a week and it involves regular evening duties until 22:30 at night. Coaching sport can involve returning from away matches late on Saturday evening. It is a big commitment, and it is not for everyone. What we have found in recent years is that for normal teaching jobs, the list of applicants to choose from is getting shorter and shorter. All we need is one outstanding candidate and we manage that – but the fields are getting smaller. I remind myself every day how fortunate we are to have such a strong teaching staff, because we cannot take it for granted.

Being able to attract the best staff is fundamental to the success of the school and offering an attractive package is essential. However, that is becoming a challenge as the state sector has seen above inflation wage increases since 2017. Chart 2 indicates that following the pay freeze immediately following Covid (which also was the case for Blundell's staff), salaries in the state sector have risen at a rapid rate. Matching that is a challenge and adds to the cost pressures of schools like ours.

A starting salary for a newly qualified teacher is just over £30,000 – which is comparable to other industries, except that there are no bonuses, and no big pay rises to look forward to in the future. That is someone with a minimum of two, and often three degrees (and the student debt to prove it).

Someone working 40 hours per week on the minimum wage would be earning around £24,000 p.a. It highlights some of the challenges we face in the education sector when you ask teachers to work +50 hours per week. Of course, teachers get terrific holidays, but if you are working six, sometimes seven days a week, then those holidays become a necessity rather than a luxury if you want energetic and inspirational staff. That is not to say that staff are discontented by any means, but it is important structure a package that will attract excellent

Chart 2: Teachers' salary increases



Source: institute of Fiscal Studies

staff – but it also highlights why it is sometimes difficult to entice Maths, Physics or Economics graduates from fields where their earning potential is considerably more.

There are other factors too, like the high levels of inflation and higher energy prices. The Governors’ decision to prioritise investment in energy efficient interventions over sports facilities was prudent and we are now benefiting from lower energy costs. It pains me to think that my Headship will be remembered for roofs, windows and solar panels; we certainly have spent a fair bit on those in the past few years. Those projects are not especially sexy – not like shiny new sports facilities or teaching blocks – but they are part of making good decisions for the long-term financial robustness of the school. Any investment requires a trade off, and we have prioritised energy efficiency. That is not only financially smart, but it is also ethically the right thing to have prioritised.

And finally, our new government has recently introduced contentious policies around Business Rate Relief (BRR) and VAT on school fees. BRR relief will cost the school approximately £250k per annum. We have approached the council to ask for their consideration in this regard, appealing to them to phase in the increase over a few years, but that was rejected out of hand.

VAT has been well debated in the national press, and I have little to add to that. It is what it is. As a school we made the choice to share the load with parents. The mitigating discount that we have offered parents who have been exposed to VAT will cost the school around a £1m this academic year alone. We are fortunate to be in a robust financial position, despite the headwinds of the past few years.

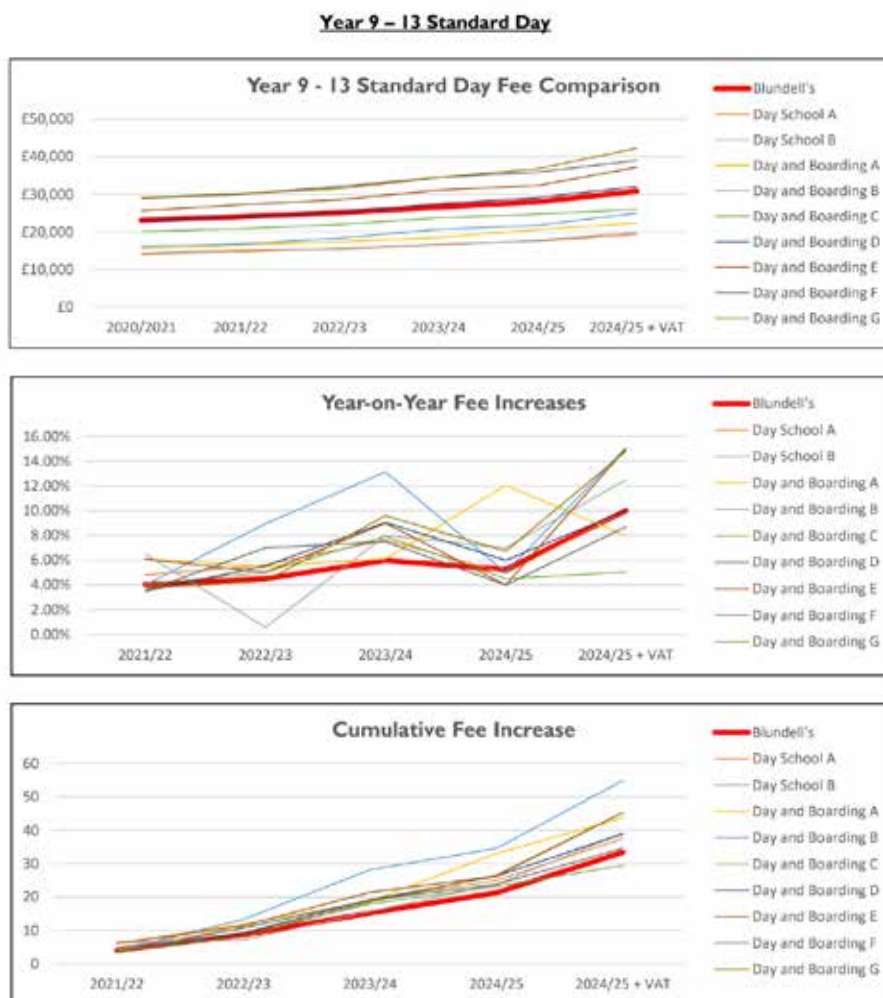
I try not to dwell on what the financial picture might have looked like without these setbacks: what we might have been able to do. It is what it is

SCHOOL FEES: A CAREFUL BALANCING ACT

There are four main factors that are considered when Governors make decisions on fees:

1. Economic environment – as explained above with regards to inflation and wage growth, for example.
2. Costs of the school. What do we need to pay staff and what other costs (like TPS or higher food costs) need to be covered?
3. Pupil numbers for the forthcoming year. Full Boarders contribute more to the bottom line than local day pupils, so it is not just what the numbers look like, but also the distribution of day pupils and boarders.
4. What are other schools doing with regards to fees?

The first three are largely self-explanatory and I have referred to them already, but the depth of analysis that goes into monitoring competitor school fees may be of interest. For the past 6 years we have collected data on approximately 20 schools in the South-West and we therefore have an accurate picture of how school fees at other schools are tracking. This forms part of our decision-making when we set the fees. We have data sets for every section of the school community and below I have shared one set of data with you.



- In the sample of ten schools in the South-West the highest fee is £42,233 and the lowest is £19,289, although at Day Schools the lunches are charged over and above the fees. At £30,789, Blundell's fees are 5% above the mean. In 2020/21 we were 10% above the mean and we have intentionally brought this down to its current level of 5% above the mean.
- In the second chart the Blundell's line is less erratic than most other schools. Most lines follow a similar pattern but there are some exceptions.
- The range in the cumulative effect of fee increases over this period is not as big with the bottom end being 29.45% and the top 54.88%. Blundell's is second lowest at 33.37%. One pattern stands out across all the sectors, and that is that our year-on-year fees are more stable and less erratic than any of our competitors. I would like to think that is because of careful financial planning and thoughtful decision making.

OTHER REVENUE STREAMS: SWEATING THE ASSETS AND FOREIGN VENTURES

Before 2018 Blundell's had little in the form of alternative income streams, and one of the first objectives was to establish a profitable lettings programme to ensure that the school was generating income during the holidays, especially during the long summer break.

After launching the initiative in 2019 it was all put on ice during Covid, and the programme was relaunched in summer of 2022. We have now had three years of summer holiday lets and the revenue in 2024 was around £500k, with a surplus of approximately 30% - 40%. We are learning quickly, and we believe there is more scope in this business. The intention is that the money we make from lettings goes back into the school, and specifically into investing in the boarding houses. We are also exploring lets at other times of the year although this is much more disruptive as pupils would need to pack up their rooms to accommodate these.

Many UK independent schools receive an income from schools abroad. We have been exploring opportunities and are actively engaged with partners in India and China. Nothing has come of that yet, but we remain open to the idea. There are different models of partnership, ranging from the school constructing the building from the ground up, to a simpler and less lucrative franchising arrangement.

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE – SHINY NEW THINGS

We were very pleased to be able to announce a £4m investment in new sports facilities very recently. It has been a long time in coming and it has been a frustration that we have not been able to do things sooner.

As I have explained earlier in this piece, cash flow has been a key aspect to this and the various headwinds that we have faced has meant that the cash that may have been available to spend on new facilities has gone into ensuring that we remained financially robust through the pandemic and that we did not need to pass all the VAT onto parents.

In addition to that, the school had a substantial loan that we have been paying off at a rate of £500k per year. Of the annual cash surplus of approximately £1m, more than 50% has gone into loan repayments leaving the other £500k for smaller projects – and there have been many of those. However, it has not allowed us to do any major projects, and we also have not wanted to increase our borrowing.

Having said that, we have not stood still, despite all of the above. We have redeveloped spaces like the FoB's Café and the Beale Centre. The Maths Department has been completely refurbished, and the Music School has been extended and refurbished. Petergate has had substantial investment and lower grade refurbishments have happened in the Geography and History departments. New lights have been erected over the hockey pitches, and investment in excellent equipment has allowed our grounds department to do their jobs brilliantly. Roofs have been replaced, windows double glazed and solar panels attached on every roof top available. At the Prep School we have installed a new science lab, added a dance studio and also added solar panels. We really have not stood still, but we also have not had a signature piece of work done.

Our long-term loans are almost entirely paid off and our annual servicing of that debt will fall from £544k per annum to £144k per annum. This means we have more cash left over and it means that we can borrow a bit too. We have also been given a generous gift from an Old Blundellian, and we have sold a small parcel of land. All of this means that we can commit £4m to investment without it impacting on the profit and loss account.

The £4m will be spent primarily on sports facilities and will include a new ¼ size astro pitch (MUGA – Multi Use Games Area) at the Prep, a resurfacing of the older astro at the senior school, investment in outdoor cricket facilities, work in the Sports Hall, and an extension, refitting and re-equipping of the Fitness Suite. The second phase of the project will see an extension and refurbishment of the Sports Pavilion to include better changing facilities, an entertainment area and classrooms and offices to house the PE department. We also intend to put a roof over the swimming pool.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT – ENSURING WE CONTINUE TO INVEST IN THE SITE

Capital Expenditure is financed through three sources of finance:

1. Cash Surplus: This is the difference between cash received (fees, lettings income) and expenditure (salaries, food, energy, maintenance, etc). Some of that cash surplus goes towards servicing of debt and the rest is available to be reinvested in the school. It is also sensible to build up cash reserves for the proverbial rainy day – or pandemic or earlier than anticipated VAT charges and the like.

2. Donations and Legacies: The school is fortunate to have a generous and supportive community of Old Blundellians and past and present parents who have supported the school in different ways. We have not run a specific campaign for some years, but many school will raise millions towards specific projects through the generosity of its community. Donations fall into different categories:

a. **Restricted Funds – Bursaries:** Some donations are made with the specific intent of giving financial support to pupils who could otherwise not afford to come to Blundell's. Sometimes those funds are intended to be spent immediately, but more often than not we manage them as endowments whereby we draw down a certain amount per year but keep the capital sum intact. That allows the donation to continue to support pupils in perpetuity. As an example, from a fund of £1m we would draw down £40,000 (4%) per annum to support bursaries. If the fund grew at a rate faster than 4% then the fund would grow. If it performed poorly and returned less than 4%, we would still draw down the

£40,000 and the fund would shrink a little bit. Restricted funds mean that the money must be used for the specific purpose for which it was intended. That can be quite broad (for bursaries) or it can be specific (for pupils want to learn to play the organ). The school usually does not have much control over the restriction.

b. Restricted Funds – Capital Projects: Some donations are made for a specific purpose. For example, a gift may specifically be for the chapel or the theatre. The school can therefore only use the money for that purpose. Money raised through a fundraising appeal aimed at a particular project cannot be repurposed for something completely different without the agreement of those who made the donations.

c. Unrestricted Funds are gifts and donations made to the school without any specification. These are what are known as unrestricted funds and can be used for any purpose the school sees fit.

3. Borrowing: The school has worked hard to pay down its debts over the past 10 years. Borrowing does allow a good cash injection and in recent years interest rates have been relatively low. However, it ties up cash during the duration of the loan period. As with all borrowing, it is cash now instead of cash later and at times that is perfectly sensible and economically justifiable. However, at a time when we have used up quite a lot of cash, there has been an understandable reluctance to commit to more cash outflows whilst the debt servicing commitments were quite significant. At the end of 2025, a large proportion of the long-term loan will be paid and that will free up opportunities to borrow more money. However, we need to strike a balance between securing new loans and building up our cash reserves.

FINAL COMMENTS

Sound financial management has never been more important in Independent schools than it is in our current tumultuous times. The challenge is to find the appropriate balance between managing costs and increasing fees. If we cut costs too much then parents pay more for the same, or an inferior product. On the other hand, raising fees more allows more investment, but fees are already out of reach for many families. To me, the target is to ensure that we provide good value for money. It is more palatable to pay a lot for something that is very good, and that is the target.

that is very good, and that is the target. As someone with far greater credentials than myself once said: “It is better to have a great product at a fair price, than a fair product at a great price”.



THE CO-CURRICULAR ETHOS AT BLUNDELL'S: CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING AND PURPOSE BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

by Adèle Worsley

INTRODUCTION

“Leave all the afternoon for exercise and recreation, which are as necessary as reading. I will rather say more necessary because health is worth more than learning.” — Thomas Jefferson

While the academic credentials of Blundell's are indisputably first-rate, setting us apart from our competitors in terms of what we offer our students, the co-curricular life of the school is the beating heart of our community. In a school that seeks to equip young people with meaning and purpose, it is important to give them a program that allows them to explore, grow, and thrive beyond the classroom. From discovering hidden talents to building resilience and fostering belonging, we are committed to reviewing, developing, and enhancing our co-curricular offering.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Scientific research highlights that co-curricular activities play a crucial role in students' cognitive and affective development, educational effectiveness, satisfaction, and in fostering a sense of belonging (Paulino, 2022). Additionally, Eccles et al. (2003) found that students involved in extracurricular activities achieved higher academic performance and were more likely to attend college. Twenty-five years working in boarding schools have left me in no doubt: a strong co-curricular programme is essential to the development of young people. Indeed, this aspect of school life is every bit as important as academia, and boarding schools, with their unique structure and flexibility, are the ideal environment to deliver education. The co-curricular activities which our students enjoy, often reveal untapped potential and moments of growth.

Take the shy student who surprises themselves by landing a main part in the school musical, and finds their voice for the first time. Previously they had felt unremarkable, but now, as they walk around campus, they are stopped by their peers and teachers to offer congratulations on their stunning performance. Then there's the fourteen-year-old girl who has always struggled to make friends, never really feeling like she fits in. Then she joins the theatre tech team, where she discovers a new 'family' with whom she can belong. Or the student facing academic challenges, trying to make sense of their ADD diagnosis, but who suddenly unlocked their creativity through costume design, ultimately earning an A grade in their EPQ. These are just a few of the countless examples I have witnessed where students have flourished through co-curricular opportunities.

James Shone, an advocate for youth development, speaks of the 'balloon' of self-belief inside every child. These balloons can be inflated by young people finding and doing things they are good at, through recognising their unique qualities, and in finding a sense of belonging – a place where they feel they fit in. Co-curricular activities not only create mini communities, in which young people find their place, but they also give teachers, mentors, and coaches countless opportunities to provide positive experiences and offer encouragement and praise. Every positive comment further inflates these balloons, leading to an increasing number of young people spurred on to achieve their potential. By offering a broad and diverse range of activities, we give our students the best chance of finding what enables them to shine.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The connection between co-curricular participation and mental health is well-documented. Countless studies have concluded that organised activities, whether sport, outdoor pursuits or the creative arts, can promote good mental health. A 2016 study, on the effect of physical activity on cognitive and mental health in young people, highlighted a wide range of benefits including reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Lubans et al., 2016). Physical activities like team sports have long been recognised for decreasing cortisol levels while increasing endorphins, improving mood, and reducing anxiety. Additionally, pupils engaged in co-curricular activities develop self-esteem and self-worth, reducing the likelihood of experiencing anxiety, depression, and social difficulties (JETIR, 2019).

Music has been widely recognised as having profound psychological benefits: singing relieves stress and tension and develops self-confidence. Playing a musical instrument is uniquely associated with engaging every part of the brain leading to enhanced memory, language skills, and emotional intelligence. In his article, "The Positive Influence of Music on the Human Brain," Zhang (2020) writes: "Research shows that the influence of music on people is not only emotional; it has a positive effect on brain development and cognitive development. Different states of the brain understand music in different ways, stimulating specific areas of the brain, causing corresponding physiological effects. As a result, many researchers see music as a potential therapeutic tool rather than mere entertainment."

Drama, too, offers something for everyone, whether it's acting, dancing, designing costumes, building sets, or playing in the orchestra. Working together as a cast and crew encourages collaboration and a sense of belonging. Students in a musical production spend weeks working together, fostering camaraderie, purpose, and mutual support. American novelist and playwright, Thornton Wilder writes: "Theatre is the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being." Whether in sports teams or creative ensembles, these shared experiences help students feel valued and connected, boosting their self-esteem as well as their sense of meaning and belonging. Which, in turn, allows them to realise their potential in all areas of school life including academia.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved." — Billie Jean King

Resilience is an essential skill in today's fast-paced and ever-changing world. Yet, in a time where so much is instantly accessible at the click of a button, it is not something we can take for granted. Resilience is built through challenge and perseverance, and when these experiences don't naturally present themselves, we must take responsibility for creating them.

Outdoor education, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award or Ten Tors expeditions, push students out of their comfort zones. Facing the harsh Dartmoor winds while navigating challenging terrain teaches students grit, determination, and teamwork. Similarly, team sports require commitment, effort, and collaboration, even for students who may not naturally enjoy them. Let's be honest—not every young person loves sport, just as not every child enjoys maths. But the answer, of course, isn't simply to remove the challenge. If one of my students finds maths difficult, I don't suggest they stop attending lessons. Instead, I make those lessons as accessible, engaging, and enjoyable as possible. Even then, some students may never love maths—but every hurdle they overcome, every mistake they learn from, and every piece of independent work they push through helps build character and resilience that will serve them well long after they leave school.

Our approach to co-curricular activities is no different. Sometimes students will be asked to take part in activities they don't enjoy, that challenge them, or where they don't shine as brightly as their peers. And encouraging, nudging, and teaching them the value of commitment, open-mindedness, resilience, and perseverance. We remind them that their efforts will lead to something worthwhile: new skills, greater insight, deeper understanding, and perhaps even a new passion.

The negative impact of smartphone overuse on the wellbeing of children and teenagers is indisputable. One notable example is the overstimulation of dopamine receptors, which can lead to desensitisation over time. Challenging tasks - like learning a new skill or meeting physical and mental demands - require sustained effort and delayed gratification. This process promotes balanced dopamine release, strengthening the brain's reward system and helping to reset it. Daunting experiences offer invaluable lessons. They teach students to persist through discomfort, adapt to new situations, and emerge stronger. This resilience equips them to face life's inevitable challenges with confidence, both during their time at school and beyond.

INCLUSIVITY AND OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

Blundell's co-curricular program is founded on inclusivity, ensuring there is something for everyone. Mahoney et al. (2005) found that participation in extracurricular activities was associated with a greater sense of school belonging and lower levels of social isolation. This association highlights the importance of inclusivity in fostering a sense of community within schools. Whether it's sports, music, drama, or outdoor activities, we aim to meet students where they are and help them thrive.

In sport, our philosophy of "sport for all" ensures that every student, from the most competitive athlete to the cautious beginner, has a chance to participate and enjoy. In my first few weeks at Blundell's I remember being struck by the enthusiasm of the U14B rugby coach. I watched as he converted a group of hesitant and apprehensive boys - unsure about the physicality and potential discomfort of rugby - by meeting them at their level. With gentle encouragement, he introduced them to new skills at a pace they felt comfortable with. It was remarkable to see these boys, initially full of trepidation, begin to take genuine pleasure in the game. The stereotype that rugby is only for fearless, alpha-male types was overturned thanks to the inclusive approach adopted by the coach. This inclusive spirit extends beyond rugby; our Director of Cricket dedicates as much time to the least experienced cricketers as to the 1st XI, and our top netball coaches invest in developing every pupil, regardless of their ability, fostering their enjoyment and love of being part of a team.

Those leading the creative arts at Blundell's share this same commitment to giving every student the chance to experience and enjoy their disciplines. In Year 7, every student takes part in the summer series of short plays, relishing the opportunity to act and perform for an audience. They also all join the School House choir, performing at the Salvete Scholastici service, alongside the chamber choir, in their first term. Opportunities for growth are open to all, with no limit to what can be achieved.

The range of activities is extensive, from fives, chess club, and costume making, to mountain biking, water polo, sailing, table tennis, and pickleball, to name just a few. This breadth ensures that every student can find an activity they love and pursue it with enthusiasm.

A WORD OF CAUTION: BALANCING BUSY LIVES

"A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men... of men in whom every vital impulse slowly withers, as though they were cut flowers in a vase." — Bertrand Russell

While some students may excel as the lead in a play, the star of the 1st XV rugby squad, the first violinist in the orchestra, and an Oxbridge scholar all at once, others will struggle under such immense pressure if left unchecked. Children and teenagers need time to simply be — to chat around the breakfast table, to get bored, to play, to relax, and to breathe. Over-scheduling every moment of their day does them a grave disservice.

Particularly in sport, we have witnessed a considerable increase in what is expected from school aged children when it comes to training programmes. Twenty years ago, pre-season training consisted of a couple of hours the day before term started, largely with the purpose of

reminding pupils how to hold a hockey stick and ensure everyone had the correct kit in tow. Club sport required just one training session a week, and school sport was limited to one sport per term. Today, as young people face increasing pressure to attend numerous training sessions outside school and participate in sports spanning multiple terms to remain competitive against rival teams, we recognise our responsibility to keep a close eye on the schedules of our busiest pupils.

Without wanting to detract from the very many benefits of co-curricular endeavours, and while a full co-curricular schedule undoubtedly offers valuable lessons in time management and responsibility, maintaining balance is essential. At Blundell's, we are committed to monitoring the schedules of our busiest pupils, offering mentorship, advice, and guidance, and, when necessary, giving them permission to pause, say no, and find time for themselves.

CONCLUSION

The co-curricular ethos at Blundell's is simple yet profound: inclusivity, opportunity, and a commitment to fostering growth. Whether a student is a concert pianist or picking up a drumstick for the first time, every individual is encouraged to explore, participate, and find their place. Our co-curricular program helps students develop confidence, resilience, and a lifelong love of learning. It is through these activities that they discover their passions, connect with others, and prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

I reflect on my own time at boarding school: Coach journeys to fixtures, lost in my thoughts as I gazed out at the rolling Somerset countryside. The first time our crew managed to stand up in the boat—eight of us perfectly balanced—realising how much we relied on each other. Roasting foil-wrapped bananas stuffed with melting chocolate buttons over a campfire after a gruelling head race. Sharing meagre army rations on exhausting treks through the Mendip Hills, heavy backpacks weighing us down but laughter sustaining us as we completed our mission with dogged determination. Stepping onto the stage, heart pounding, blinded by stage lights in my debut as Anne Frank. Singing at the top of my lungs in chapel—perhaps not particularly tunefully, but with great gusto nevertheless. Taking cheeky shortcuts in cross-country, delighting in outfoxing the teacher on duty.

But more than any single moment, it was the journey—discovering the world around me, testing and challenging my limits, forging friendships that will last a lifetime, and embracing every opportunity that made life at boarding school so rich, so exhilarating, so extraordinary. This is what I carry with me. And this is the gift we must pass on—to inspire future generations to embrace every opportunity, push beyond their boundaries, and to treasure the adventure of life.

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.” —Mark Twain

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THE IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON SCIENCE EDUCATION

by Jonathan Ratcliffe

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming various fields, and its influence on science education is becoming increasingly significant. At schools like Blundell's, research and policy development are helping to integrate essential AI-related skills into teaching, ensuring that pupils are well-equipped to navigate a future where this technology is continually evolving. AI's role in science education is particularly profound, as it introduces new tools, methodologies, and perspectives that challenge traditional approaches to learning and inquiry. Understanding these developments is crucial in preparing students not only to utilise AI effectively but also to become future leaders in their respective fields.

AI IN SCIENTIFIC PRACTICES

In scientific research, AI has expanded the boundaries of what is possible, revolutionising tasks such as hypothesis generation, experiment design, and data analysis. One notable example is AlphaFold, an AI system that has transformed biochemistry by accurately predicting protein structures, earning recognition as "Method of the Year 2021" by Nature. Such advancements demonstrate how AI enhances efficiency while redefining fundamental scientific processes.

Scientific practices, as outlined in frameworks such as the National Research Council's 2012 report, include questioning, modelling, investigation, data analysis, and explanation construction. AI is already influencing each of these areas. In disciplines like particle physics and materials science, AI algorithms identify patterns within vast datasets, leading to novel hypotheses that might otherwise be overlooked. In biological research, AI-driven molecular dynamics simulations have deepened our understanding of viral structures, as seen in its application to SARS-CoV-2's spike protein. AI is also proving invaluable in data analysis, with researchers from institutions such as the University of Oxford and the University of Sydney using DeepMind technology to identify new mathematical theorems in knot theory. In astronomy, machine learning algorithms have even rediscovered Newton's law of gravitation by analysing planetary motion data. These examples highlight how AI is not just augmenting but fundamentally transforming scientific practices, presenting educators with the challenge of integrating these innovations into curricula so that students develop a contemporary understanding of scientific inquiry.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCIENCE EDUCATION

Integrating AI into science education requires aligning classroom practices with modern scientific methodologies, yet it also raises key questions. Curriculum design must determine which AI-driven scientific practices are most relevant for secondary education, whether that involves introducing students to AI's role in protein folding predictions or data anomaly detection. The cognitive demands of such topics must also be carefully managed to ensure students develop essential problem-solving skills rather than simply relying on AI for answers. Effective teaching strategies, such as AI-based simulations and interactive models, can support learning, but educators must be adequately trained to incorporate AI concepts into their lessons. Given that traditional education systems often struggle to keep pace with technological advancements, there is a growing need for schools to adapt, and for those early adopters, like Blundell's to share knowledge with other stakeholders.

EMERGING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The rapid evolution of AI presents both challenges and opportunities for science education. Ethical considerations must be addressed, as AI tools often rely on datasets that may contain biases, making it essential for students to understand the importance of responsible AI use. Additionally, the complexity of AI can be intimidating for students, so simplifying concepts and incorporating hands-on experiences, such as training machine learning models, can make learning more engaging. AI's interdisciplinary nature offers another opportunity, enabling students to see its applications across fields from biology to physics and fostering a more holistic scientific education. As AI becomes increasingly integral to scientific research, equipping students with AI-related skills will also enhance their career prospects in STEM fields.

EXAMPLES OF AI IN THE CLASSROOM

Several initiatives illustrate how AI can be integrated into science education. Educational robots are being used to teach coding, problem-solving, and teamwork, making learning more interactive. AI-based simulations allow students to explore complex scientific phenomena such as chemical reactions or protein folding in virtual environments, providing a deeper understanding of abstract concepts. Intelligent tutoring systems offer personalised learning experiences by adapting to individual student needs and providing targeted feedback. Furthermore, involving students in data science projects, where they curate, clean, and analyse datasets, introduces them to practical AI applications in scientific research. These examples demonstrate how AI can enrich learning experiences and support the development of analytical skills essential for future scientists.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND EDUCATORS

Teachers play a crucial role in the successful integration of AI into science education, yet they often face barriers such as limited resources and insufficient training. Addressing these challenges requires systemic changes, such as providing professional development to equip teachers with AI knowledge and skills. Blundell's is actively focusing on this effort. Collaboration between educators and scientists can also help bridge the gap between classroom learning and cutting-edge research, ensuring that students receive an education that reflects the latest advancements in science. Additionally, developing curriculum resources that align with AI-informed scientific practices can alleviate the burden on teachers and facilitate more effective instruction.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

As AI becomes increasingly embedded in society, education systems must evolve to prepare students for a world in which AI is ubiquitous. This involves not only teaching technical AI skills but also fostering critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and an awareness of AI's broader societal implications. By integrating AI into science education in a meaningful and thoughtful way, educators can ensure that students are equipped to navigate and contribute to the rapidly changing landscape of scientific research and technological innovation.

CONCLUSION

The integration of AI into science education marks a significant shift, offering exciting new possibilities to enhance learning while also presenting complex challenges. Successfully adapting curricula, refining teaching strategies, and supporting educators through training and resources will be essential in realising AI's full potential in the classroom. By proactively addressing these issues, educators can harness AI's transformative power to make science education more relevant and impactful, ensuring that students are well-prepared for the future of scientific inquiry and discovery.



MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS AND THE DESIRE TO REALISE POTENTIAL: WHY DOES CREATIVITY MATTER?

by *Lucy Richards*

A fundamental element of our teaching philosophy at Blundell's is to help pupils navigate through new, often exciting and sometimes challenging periods of their lives at school. We may at times support our pupils in boarding houses, in training sessions or dance classes, even out on Dartmoor. Often, we begin to guide them in the every-day routine: our classrooms.

In the pursuit of becoming an effective teacher, many consider that one essential role is to encourage creativity both inside and outside of the classroom. In learning, creativity underpins an essential basis for teaching. Incorporating it into the lives of our pupils can improve their communicative competence and self-esteem, whilst being both personally rewarding by giving them the opportunity to explore (Maley, 2015, p8). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Koltko-Rivera, 2006/Maslow 1943, 1954), and his theory of self-actualisation, the ultimate goal of human motivation is a person's desire for self-fulfilment and realising potential. As a result, through creativity, students will be able to realise their full potential in learning.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CREATIVITY AND CRITICAL THINKING

Creativity can be defined in four different ways: imaginative, purposeful, original, and valuable. Creativity has the potential to transform subject matter from fantasy to true-to-life situations, which in turn needs to be facilitated appropriately (Fehér, 2007). Therefore, as teachers our aim is to create an open classroom environment, giving opportunity for learners to be creative and take risks. The element of unpredictability in a creative classroom, from an acquisition and application of knowledge perspective, is also immensely beneficial, because students learn to take risks. Although risk-taking is dependent on pupils' personality, it is an essential element to progress in learning (Lightbrown and Spada, 2013). Risk-taking in an environment where the teacher has built good rapport will prepare pupils for setbacks and give them the confidence to face situations outside the classroom.

Creative thinking and critical thinking go hand-in-hand when it comes to the creative classroom. Promoting creative thinking firstly generates the learners' new ideas, but discussions through critical thinking can then be then utilised in this type of environment (Fisher, 2012). The teacher would then scaffold and facilitate meaningful discussions, to demonstrate a purposeful structure to an activity. An example of this would be if pupils are required to respond to certain aspects of each other's work, such as clarity of opinion or creative design. Through an opportunity to respond to creative work in a safe space, pupils focus not only on another pupils' self-expression but also on the learning process itself.

Maley and Peachey (2015, p6), discuss how teachers can foster a more creative classroom by creating a space for learners to feel confident in their expression of language, rather than scrutinising error. However, despite the freedom of creative activities, errors cannot simply be overlooked. Errors have traditionally been viewed as an indication of failure on the part of both teacher and pupil but are more commonly considered a normal stage in the development of communication and expression (Littlewood, 1984). The concentration ought not to be diminishing to the student's abilities or their self-confidence as a learner. Indeed, errors are a part of risk-taking which should be encouraged to maintain an atmosphere of support.

MATERIALS: THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE STUDENT

When working from a textbook, if materials do not give enough scope for creativity or the subject matter is not relevant enough to all pupils, this may limit enthusiasm. Teachers therefore tailor materials, making them relevant, considering their context and particular preferences. One certain limitation of this idea is that pupils are individual with different interests, and their context is likely to differ. To overcome this challenge, teachers could instead adapt materials and add flexibility for pupils to respond in their own way. Fehér (2007) proposes that adding creativity to ordinary classroom activities is successful when these activities involve a transformation or shift between elements. An example of this is the use of role-play or letter-writing, when the pupils' personalities are transformed, or their perspectives are shifted.

Teachers may consider it their responsibility alone to choose activities. Yet, in giving students a choice between materials, the time spent on preparing these can be minimised and pupil enthusiasm can be increased. Moreover, by creating materials instead of using the coursebook alone, teachers can experience ample positive emotions, such as fulfilment and gratification, which can strengthen their profession and passion (Arnold, 2014). Naturally, the limitations of this suggestion include the specific curriculum objectives to pass exams or assessments in education, and the timing restrictions of a lesson. Therefore, by making pupils aware that creativity only begins with activities during the lesson and continues outside of the class is a possible solution.

The notion of self-efficacy and mastery experience in learning as discussed in Mercer and Williams (2014) consider these as a source of information that can influence a pupils' perceived capability to perform. It is considered that self-efficacy beliefs can be altered using activities where pupils experience success, many of which are fundamentally creative. Examples include presenting ideas in a comfortable learning environment, discussing opinions and the opportunity to share personal experiences.

Having understood the learning process from the perspective of both pupil and teacher, I believe that success in a creative classroom is highly attainable. The essence of creativity is originality, imagination and reasoning with new ideas, which learners can achieve when both the activities and working environment inspire them. In turn, this will positively influence their self-efficacy beliefs and cognitive development, to apply their competencies in the real world. Ultimately, as we prepare our pupils in the creative classroom, we stimulate an environment that inspires dynamism, flexibility and risk-taking which will set students up for the ultimate goal of learning: application outside of the classroom.

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HOW AI WILL SUPPORT PUPILS WITH ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS IN THE FUTURE

by Andrew Kingdon

HOW AI WILL SUPPORT PUPILS WITH ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS IN THE FUTURE

The world of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) is evolving rapidly. Over recent years, media coverage of ALN has increased significantly, and teachers are now better equipped to identify pupils experiencing classroom challenges that require further investigation. Supporting pupils with ALN is one of the most fascinating and rewarding challenges in education. Why? Because we don't all learn in the same way, meaning that not all revision or learning methods work for everyone. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is poised to revolutionise education, particularly for pupils with additional needs, in ways we could only have imagined five years ago.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF AI IN EDUCATION

AI has the potential to make education more inclusive and accessible, especially for pupils with ALN. At Blundell's, we pride ourselves on providing tailored one-to-one support for pupils with ALN, and AI promises to enhance this personalised approach further. Over the coming years, AI is likely to play an increasingly significant role in education.

One key way AI will support pupils with ALN is through personalised learning plans (Department for Education, 2023). Traditional classroom teaching often struggles to accommodate diverse learning styles and paces. Although in its infancy, AI-powered platforms can assess a pupil's strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, tailoring lessons and exercises accordingly. For example, pupils with dyslexia may benefit from tools that convert text into audio or highlight words for better comprehension (Speechify, 2023). While existing programmes already offer excellent support for dyslexic learners, innovations like ChatGPT have the potential to be a game-changer.

CHATGPT AND ITS ROLE IN SUPPORTING DYSLEXIA

Most readers will now be familiar with ChatGPT. For some, this innovation inspires hope and anticipation; for others, it evokes unease. While ChatGPT could be misused, such as finding answers without meaningful engagement, when used properly, it holds tremendous potential.

For pupils with dyslexia, ChatGPT offers exciting possibilities. Dyslexia, as described by Kelly and Phillips (2022), is a learning disorder that affects reading, writing, and spelling. It also impacts cognitive processes such as memory, processing speed, and coordination (Reid, 2009). AI could provide essential interventions to support these learners in an increasingly technological world.

AI-powered tools, such as ChatGPT, could reduce anxiety and boost engagement by offering individualised approaches to learning. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) notes that "AI provides another individualised approach to learning, particularly for those who find reading for information challenging. It can cut to the chase, providing explanations of concepts in layman's terms and supporting learners who need clarification or reinforcement" (BERA, 2023).

AI FOR PUPILS WITH ADHD AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING DIFFICULTIES

The ADHD Centre (2022) states that ADHD can have a huge impact on a person's executive functioning. Executive function is a key role of the brain's frontal lobe. It acts as the brain's self-management system, helping with behaviour and everyday tasks. Some important executive functions include:

- Managing time
- Staying organised
- Multitasking
- Remembering information
- Planning and prioritising
- Paying attention
- Regulating emotions

These skills are essential for understanding how your actions and words affect others, managing tasks efficiently, and avoiding mistakes in crucial moments. Executive functioning isn't just important for work and education—it also plays a big role in social interactions, helping you navigate different scenarios effectively.

AI could help individuals with executive functioning difficulties by providing tailored support in various areas. For instance, AI tools can set up reminders for appointments or homework using phones or virtual assistants, ensuring important tasks are not overlooked. Platforms like Monday.com enable users to create and prioritise to-do lists, helping them stay organised and focused. Time management apps such as TrevorAI can break tasks into smaller steps and assist with planning the day through time-blocking features, which can make managing schedules more efficient. Additionally, tools like Grammarly enhance writing productivity, while techniques like the Pomodoro method, supported by AI, improve focus through structured, timed work sessions. Over time, AI becomes smarter as it learns from user interactions, offering increasingly personalised support tailored to individual needs (The ADHD Centre, 2023). For people with ADHD, these tools make managing time, staying organised, and staying on track much easier.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RESPONSIBLE USE

While the possibilities of AI are vast, ethical concerns such as data privacy and algorithmic bias must be addressed. Clear guidance is essential to ensure responsible use. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) recently reminded educators that AI-generated content, like traditional sources, must be cited to avoid plagiarism (JCQ, 2024).

CONCLUSION

AI holds immense promise in supporting pupils with additional learning needs. By fostering personalised, accessible, and inclusive education, AI can help break down barriers and enable all pupils to thrive. As the BERA blog highlights, AI, when used correctly, could significantly benefit individuals with dyslexia by reducing anxiety, improving engagement, and offering tailored learning approaches. As technology advances, it is crucial to prioritise the diverse needs of learners, ensuring a future where education truly caters to everyone.

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LEARNING WITH INTELLIGENCE: HOW WE ARE USING AI TO SUPPORT EVERY PUPIL'S EDUCATION

by Charles List

In education, as in life, it is often the slow and steady approach that wins the race. While the world around us has been swept up in a wave of excitement and anxiety over Artificial Intelligence (AI), we at Blundell's have chosen a path that is calm, thoughtful, and above all, intentional.

We have one simple guiding principle: *AI will not replace teachers, but teachers and pupils who learn to use AI well will thrive in a world where those skills are essential.*

As we continue exploring how best to use AI in our classrooms, we would like to share with you, our parent community, how we plan to support your children in learning not **just** with AI, but also **about** AI; safely, ethically, and purposefully.

WHY AI, AND WHY NOW?

AI is not on the horizon, it is already here. Whether it is summarising a chapter, creating revision flashcards, or translating a text, pupils are already using AI tools in their schoolwork. Tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, Photomath, and Google Gemini are readily available and often used independently by pupils outside of school hours.

But just because AI is accessible does not mean it is always used effectively, or appropriately. That is where schools must step in.

We believe it would be irresponsible to ignore AI or pretend it does not exist in the lives of our pupils. Instead, we are choosing to meet this moment head-on, guiding our young people to develop *AI literacy*; the ability to use these tools thoughtfully, critically, and ethically.

OUR APPROACH: LEARN FAST, ACT SLOWLY

This phrase has guided our internal discussions since AI began to gain momentum in education. We are determined to learn quickly and widely, drawing on international research, government guidance, and expert input, but to act with care and caution, especially when it comes to integrating AI into your children's learning experience.

Since early 2024, we have been laying the foundations for a structured and evidence-informed approach:

- We have established an **AI Committee** comprised of senior leaders, department heads, and classroom teachers across the Prep and Senior Schools
- We have hosted staff development sessions and Common Room briefings to explore how AI will impact teaching and learning.
- We created an **AI Strategy and Policy**, which has been approved by our Governors and shared with parents. (Thank you to those who gave feedback!)
- We have formed a **Parent Advisory Group (PAG)** to invite AI-savvy parents and Old Blundellians in shaping the conversation.
- We are working closely with external experts, including those from the Open Data Institute, to ensure our policies meet national standards on ethics and privacy.

In other words, we are listening, learning, testing, and talking, to ensure we do this well.

FROM TEACHER USE TO PUPIL BENEFIT

In our early exploration, much of our focus was on how AI could support teachers: lesson planning, marking, admin, and resource creation. But as we now move forward, our focus is shifting to where it matters most; *our pupils*.

How can AI help them think more deeply, learn more creatively, and engage more confidently with the world around them?

Our answer lies in four clear aims. We want every pupil to:

1. Use AI to enhance thinking, not replace it
2. Understand AI's limitations and biases
3. Apply AI ethically and responsibly
4. Develop AI literacy as part of their broader digital skill set

These are not abstract ideas. They are being embedded into classroom life, step by step.

WHERE ARE PUPILS ALREADY USING AI?

We know from surveys, conversations, and classroom experience that pupils are already turning to AI tools for a variety of tasks:

- Drafting essays
- Generating creative writing prompts
- Translating foreign texts
- Solving maths problems
- Creating revision materials
- Improving grammar and punctuation
- Designing visuals or layouts for projects

The challenge is that not all of this use is productive, or even honest. It is tempting, for instance, for a pupil struggling with a long essay to ask ChatGPT to write it for them. It is equally tempting to rely on AI to generate summaries without understanding the content underneath.

This is where we step in, not to ban these tools, but to teach how to use them appropriately. Just as calculators did not end maths, and Google did not end research, AI does not need to end academic rigour. But it does need guidance, structure, and reflection.

WHAT ARE WE WORRIED ABOUT?

We understand that parents may have serious concerns about AI, and rightly so. We share many of these concerns. Here are some of the issues we are actively addressing:

- **Cheating and authenticity:** AI makes it easier to submit work that is not one's own. We are responding by embedding clarity into our academic policies: what is acceptable, what is not, and how we detect inappropriate use.
- **Loss of critical thinking:** If AI gives pupils the answers, how will they learn to think for themselves? That is why we are building activities that train pupils to critique AI-generated content, not just copy and paste it.
- **Over-reliance:** We want to avoid creating a "cut and paste" culture. We are reinforcing non-digital tasks, handwritten work, in-class assessments, and discussions as part of a balanced curriculum.
- **Privacy and data concerns:** Many AI tools require uploading personal data or pupil work. Our policy includes clear boundaries about what can be shared, with whom, and when.
- **Misinformation:** AI can "hallucinate"; make up convincing-sounding but inaccurate content. Teaching pupils to cross-reference, check facts, and think critically is essential.

Our message to parents is clear: *We are not ignoring these issues.* We are addressing them with a blend of policy, pedagogy, and pupil education.

AI LITERACY FOR PUPILS: WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

To help pupils become confident and responsible users of AI, we are introducing AI literacy in several ways:

- **Embedding it into PSHE and digital citizenship lessons** This includes topics such as AI ethics, data privacy, and the societal impact of automation.
- **Introducing AI "Passports" or Licences** A proposed system to allow structured and safe AI use, with clear learning goals and digital agreements.
- **Building AI into schemes of work** For example:
 - In English: using AI to analyse writing style, compare creative responses, or generate discussion questions.
 - In Drama: using AI to help pupils write scripts or develop character studies.
 - In Science: using AI to visualise complex processes or summarise experimental results.
- **Showcasing best practice**

We are recording pupil-led examples of AI being used well and sharing these across departments.

- **Using the "SIFT" Framework**

We are teaching pupils to:

- **Select** the right AI tool for the task
- **Input** a high-quality prompt
- **Filter** the results for accuracy
- **Transform** the output using their own judgement

This is about building *digital discernment*; a skill every young person will need in the AI-enabled workplace of tomorrow.

KEEPING EDUCATION HUMAN

We want to be absolutely clear: AI is not replacing teachers. It is not replacing the human relationships, the conversations, the lightbulb moments that define a great education.

In fact, AI is at its most powerful when it works alongside people, not instead of them. One recent study showed that individuals using AI performed as well as teams without it, but that teams with AI performed best of all.

That is our vision: not pupils working alone with AI, but *teachers and pupils working together, with AI as a helpful teammate*.

PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY OF ASSESSMENT

We are also evolving our assessment policy to ensure fairness and authenticity. We want to be crystal clear on what is allowed and what is not. For instance:

- Using AI to *generate ideas*, brainstorm or revise: **Allowed, with guidance**
- Using AI to *write assignments for submission*: **Not allowed**

We will continue to rely on teacher judgement and in-class performance to understand what pupils can truly do. We are also expanding our use of, project-based learning and collaborative tasks; areas where AI cannot replace the individual's contribution.

WORKING TOGETHER WITH YOU

We know that for many parents, AI still feels unfamiliar or unsettling. That is why we are committed to open dialogue. **Our Parent Advisory Group** is already shaping how we engage families in this conversation.

This term, we will:

- Share a parent-friendly **AI Guide** with clear dos and don'ts
- Invite you to an **AI Info Session** and Q&A forum
- Collect your feedback and suggestions to shape next steps

We want to hear your views, your hopes, and your concerns. This journey is one we are taking together.

WHAT NEXT? OUR PHASED ROLL-OUT

We are currently in the **Exploration Phase** of our AI strategy, which will run until Summer 2025. After that, we will move into:

- **Pilot Projects** (September 2025 – April 2026): Trialling subject-specific use of AI tools with structured pupil training and impact monitoring.
- **Full Implementation** (from May 2026): Embedding AI use across the curriculum in a consistent, ethical, and pupil-focused way.

Throughout this, we will continue to develop and update our AI Policy, Values and Guidelines, train staff, and share successes and learnings.

CONCLUSION: EDUCATION WITH INTELLIGENCE AND INTEGRITY

At Blundell's, we have always prided ourselves on preparing pupils not just for the next exam, but for life. Today, that preparation must include helping them navigate a world shaped by AI.

We do not see AI as a threat, but as a tool; powerful, exciting, and full of potential. But like any tool, it must be handled with skill, care, and clear boundaries.

Our pupils will not just know how to use AI, they will know how to question it, to challenge it, and to use it in ways that make their learning deeper and more meaningful.

And with your support, they will grow into young people who lead with both intelligence and integrity.

If you would like to learn more, ask questions, or get involved, please do join us at our upcoming AI Parent Forum or contact our AI Committee directly via the previously shared form. We are all on this journey together.

Let us make sure our children are not just future-ready but future-confident.



DISAPPOINTMENT, SETBACKS AND FAILURE - PART 1

by Bart Wielenga

As a naïve and confident 24-year-old, I applied for a Head of Department position. I was unsuccessful. A few years later, after I had become Head of Department, I failed in my application to be a Housemaster. I moved to a different school in a different country and was again unsuccessful when I first applied to become a Housemaster. I was finally appointed at the third time of asking. I was successful with my first application to a Deputy Headship, but in a fit of hubris I turned it down and had to wait another two years and make a number of unsuccessful applications before I came to Blundell's as Second Master. I was unsuccessful with the first three Headships I applied for. Recruitment firms might describe my route to the top as quicker than average. But the truth is, I have failed far more often than I have succeeded.

I have also missed conversions and tackles, dropped catches, made ducks, and lost more big fish than I care to count. I once wrote off a car that did not belong to me, and I have burnt the toast more than once. I have been dropped from teams, let people down, made poor decisions, ignored good advice, and eaten too many crisps.

I wish I was the man my labrador thinks I am.

Life is hard. Challenges are unavoidable. Suffering is implicit. Struggle is necessary. And yet, as parents, we all find it immensely difficult to watch our children suffer or struggle. It goes against every instinct. We want to protect them, to smooth the path ahead, to remove pain from their lives. Our intentions are noble, born of love, but the unintended consequences can be damaging.

Too often, our efforts to shield our children from difficulty rob them of the very experiences that build strength.

In this two-part essay I want to explore our relationship with disappointment, setbacks and failure. Role modelling a healthy relationship with these things is perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give our children.

MANAGING OUR DISAPPOINTMENT

A good place to begin our reflection is to consider the concept of parental disappointment. Rob Pluke, a preeminent child psychologist in South Africa, wrote a challenging book 'A son to be proud of'. He speaks insightfully about his experience of parents who ask his advice on how they, as parents, can help their children to fulfil their potential. When Rob explores this a bit more deeply, he often uncovers that the term 'their potential' actually means 'my hopes and dreams'. A father who truly believes that their son will become a star sportsman "once they begin to grow in confidence" or the mother who believes that their daughter will become a doctor "if only they persevered with the Chemistry classes she finds so difficult," are projecting their hopes on their child.

Pluke will say that these are classic cases of misplaced parental disappointment – as long as we, as parents, continue to seek the alleviation of that disappointment from our children, we have a problem. It is **our** disappointment. It belongs to us. It is our responsibility. It does not belong to our children. Often, we pin our disappointment on them and expect them to change in order to resolve our frustration – and they suffer as a result.

Let us not be too hard on ourselves. This emotion is rooted in love. We want the best for our children. But we often see "the best" through the lens of what we value and recognise, not through their evolving understanding of what matters to them. If I love cricket, it is completely natural to want my children to love cricket too – and to make heaps of runs and take lots of wickets. That would undoubtedly give me joy because it is a currency that I understand. However, I need to check my enthusiasm and remind myself that this is their life, not mine, and they must find their place in it and their interpretation of success.

We can share our values with our children. We cannot impose them.

Brené Brown writes, "Too many people decide to live disappointed rather than risk feeling disappointed." Disappointment, after all, is the inevitable cost of caring deeply and hoping boldly. If we love our children, and if we hold high aspirations for them, then disappointment will, at times, follow. But we do have a choice. We can allow disappointment to meld into frustration and resignation, or we can choose courage: the courage to keep hoping and to see disappointment not as a failure, but as an essential part of the parenting journey

WHAT HAS CAUSED THE ELEVATED LEVELS OF PARENTAL ANXIETY?

My sense is that parents' fear of failure has intensified in recent times; not a fear of their own failure, but rather a deep concern that their children may, in some way, fall short. "Failure" is a complex term, and perhaps deserving of a separate essay altogether, but part of this anxiety stems from a growing recognition that the world our children are entering is markedly different to the one we knew. For many years, it was assumed that each generation would enjoy a better standard of living than the one before. That assumption no longer holds quite so firmly. Almost two decades have passed since the financial crash of 2008, and the intervening years have brought waves of uncertainty: economic turbulence, political instability, environmental crisis and technological disruption. Whether we engage with this consciously, or it sits as a quiet concern at the back of our minds, we sense that our children face a more complex set of challenges than we did at their age, and they sense it too. That mutual awareness can be a source of shared anxiety.

If you are 17 or 18 today, you know that top university places are fiercely competitive, that the job market is evolving at pace, and that you are likely to emerge from higher education with a significant level of debt. And yet, in the face of all this, I believe this generation shows remarkable poise, determination and ambition. Gen Z is often caricatured unfairly, but in my experience, they are impressively adaptable and deeply resourceful, even if they go about things differently from our generation. The list of issues they must navigate; global warming, the volatility of financial markets, the digital world, housing costs, Brexit, Covid, these are not of their own making, and yet they are stepping up to meet them with imagination and resilience. So yes, anxiety is real, but so is courage. We should not underestimate either.

Against this backdrop, I am deeply sympathetic to both young people and their parents. It is perhaps then no surprise that one of the most significant changes in education over the past decade has been the increasing involvement of parents. Understandably, many of us find it harder to tolerate seeing our children in difficulty, especially when the world itself feels uncertain. The less control we feel over the external environment, the more we try to assert control in the one domain that matters most to us; the lives of our children. And let us be honest; parents who send their children to schools like Blundell's are often people who are used to being in control. That is not a flaw; it is a fact. But it does mean that letting go, even a little, can feel profoundly uncomfortable.

Alongside this there are, of course, other specific reasons why we parents have become more anxious, more risk averse, and consequentially more acutely concerned about the well-being of our children.

The **online world**, a foreign land to many adults, is the native environment of today's young people. As parents, we often approach this digital landscape with suspicion and concern, and not without reason. Immersion in a world shaped by social media has profound implications for the emotional and social development of children. Much of it is benign, even enriching, but there is growing evidence that we have, at times, underestimated the subtler and more pervasive effects of constant connectivity and social media exposure.

Parents are right to be alert to these risks. But it is also true that we are all learning, often in real time, how best to support our children as they grow up in a world that did not exist when we were their age. There is no blueprint, no perfect response, and the shared challenge invites humility and ongoing conversation. While we can and should take steps to protect children from overexposure, the ultimate goal is not sheltering but equipping. They will, in time, need to navigate this world on their own. And the good news is that many of them already are.

They are often less daunted by the digital space than we are. They adapt quickly, find community in unexpected places, and are often more discerning than we give them credit for! Our task is not to fear the world they inhabit, but to walk alongside them as trusted guides, recognising that while the challenges are real, so too are the opportunities for growth, connection and creativity.

Economics. In 2017 Kate Raworth published a brilliant book called 'Donut Economics', in which she set out an alternative model to the neo-classical economics which has shaped the western world. Neo-classical economics has always seen the goal to be the ever-increasing efficiency of the utilisation of scarce resources. There has been an assumption that through technological advancement and free-market forces, humanity will be able to make limited resources go further and further with inevitable increases in the standard of living. Many commentators have long pointed out that scarce resources are not just scarce, they are, in fact, finite. Therefore, the model of indefinite progress is wholly inadequate. It is said that economists, generally, are very good at explaining what has happened, but that the science has a dreadful record of predicting what will happen next! However, it does not take an economist to predict that at some point our resources will run out and that what is required is for humanity to collectively learn to live within its means.

Raworth's "Donut" model challenges us to think differently; to balance the need for human flourishing with the ecological limits of our planet. It reframes progress in terms of sustainability and fairness, not simply expansion. That shift in thinking has profound implications for the next generation, who will need to navigate, and help shape, this evolving economic landscape.

As adults, we may understand this at an intellectual level, but we do not always live as though we believe it. The decisions we make often lag behind our convictions. But our children see the gap. They are acutely aware that the systems and habits we have grown up with are not sustainable, and they are already beginning to imagine, and in some cases build, something different. That can be unsettling, but it is also energising.

We should not underestimate how seriously young people are taking this challenge, nor how creatively and pragmatically many of them are beginning to respond to it. If necessity is the mother of invention, then perhaps we can look forward to a generation of truly inventive economists, leaders and citizens.

Is Democracy broken? When we were growing up, democracy was widely regarded as virtuous and good; a cornerstone of the free world. Democratically elected governments overseeing free-market economies represented, for many, the pinnacle of political progress. But that model is now under greater scrutiny. The shortcomings of democratic processes have become more visible, and confidence in traditional institutions has been shaken. Young people are not immune to this; it affects their sense of stability and trust in the systems that shape their lives.

That said, discomfort is not always a bad thing. It can prompt important questions, sharpen awareness, and fuel the desire for something better. Feeling less safe or certain might, in some cases, be more honest than feeling falsely reassured. It may be that the current sense of unease is not simply a sign of decline, but a necessary prelude to renewal.

We are seeing young people engage with politics and global affairs in increasingly sophisticated ways. Many are deeply informed, morally alert, and eager to hold power to account. They are not cynical; they are searching. And in that search lies hope, not just for a more robust form of democracy, but for a generation determined to play a part in its renewal.

The **Mental Health** pandemic. There is undoubtedly a greater awareness of anxiety and mental health challenges today than in the past. Whether this reflects a genuine increase in prevalence, a shift in classification, or simply a more open culture around diagnosis and discussion, it is clear that we are far more attuned to the signs of poor mental health, and that awareness extends to our children too. This is, in many ways, a very good thing. Young people today are far more likely to speak up when they are struggling than many of us were at their age. The stigma has lifted, and emotional openness is becoming a strength rather than a source of shame. Schools, families and wider society are more prepared than ever to offer support and listen carefully.

Of course, greater awareness also comes with its own challenges. With the best of intentions, we can sometimes become hypervigilant; quick to interpret ordinary discomfort as a sign of something pathological. A degree of anxiety about exams, friendships or the future is entirely normal, even healthy. It is part of what motivates us, grounds us and signals that we care. What we must be careful of is becoming anxious about being anxious; a cycle that can become self-defeating.

Perhaps we are the generation who have all spent some time in therapy ourselves and, predictably, the first question asked is: “So, tell me about your parents...” It is hardly surprising, then, that we are so eager to get our parenting right, sometimes to the point of self-doubt. Forget Jonathan Haidt’s *Anxious Generation* - perhaps it is time someone wrote *The Anxious-Parent Generation!* In truth, there is much to be hopeful about. The conversations are happening. Support is available. Empathy is growing. And, most encouragingly, our children are showing a maturity and openness that gives us reason to believe they will be well-equipped to look after both their own wellbeing and that of others.

In the second part of this essay I want to look at why disappointments and setbacks and learning to deal with them are so important to the development of children, but I will conclude the first part with a challenge to us as parents:

HOW DO WE ROLE MODEL DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS AND SETBACKS?

When our children observe us in moments of difficulty, what do they see? When something feels unfair, do we lash out in frustration or blame others? When we suffer a setback, do we look outward for excuses or inward for understanding? When something we had hoped for does not come to pass, do we bottle up our emotions and quietly simmer, or are we able, at times, to show our vulnerability and talk honestly about how we feel?

Of course, none of this is easy. It takes judgement and emotional intelligence to share disappointment appropriately with our children. I am not suggesting we should pour out every emotion or narrate every frustration. But if our children never see us engaging constructively with failure, setbacks, and disappointment, then how can we expect them to know what that looks like?

The truth is that none of us gets it right all the time. Even with the best of intentions, we stumble. But this in itself can be a powerful lesson. When our children see us making sense of our struggles, when they witness us regroup, find perspective, and carry on, they are learning. When they hear us say, “I was really disappointed, but I’ve had time to think about it,” or “I didn’t handle that well at the time, but here’s what I’ve taken from it,” they are seeing emotional resilience in action.

The key is not perfection, it is reflection. Our children learn as much from what we model in quiet moments as from what we explicitly say. The way we respond to difficulty, whether with grace, grit, or even humour, sends powerful signals. They are always watching, not to catch us out, but to understand how adults navigate life.

A FINAL THOUGHT...

Most of us, as adults, know that disappointments and setbacks are not terminal. Most of us know that the emotions pass and that we will find a way to bounce back and to find a way forward.

Our children do too. They may need some help – as we might do on some occasions – but, more often than not, they will work it out with some encouragement from us. If we rush in to ‘fix’ things then we deprive them of the opportunity to learn that they can cope, that the emotions do pass, that they can bounce back. We must have more faith in their self-efficacy and resilience.

Part II will look at how we need to change the language around failure and disappointment and also take a look from a pupils perspective as to why failure, and disappointment, are so important in their developmental journey.



EMPOWERING THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL: HOW OUR MIDDLE LEADERS' PROGRAMME IS DRIVING EXCELLENCE FOR YOUR CHILDREN

by Charles List

At Blundell's, we believe that true educational excellence is not achieved by chance, it is cultivated through vision, commitment, and collaboration. As a community dedicated to nurturing the potential of every child, we know that the key to delivering consistent high-quality learning experiences lies not only in what happens in classrooms, but in the strength and clarity of the supporting leadership. To this end, we have launched a new initiative this year: our Middle Leaders' Programme.

Middle leaders include those who run academic departments, lead pastoral care, organise Year groups, or take responsibility for other areas of school life. They are, simply put, the engine room of the school: the daily decision-makers, the motivators, the listeners, the organisers. They shape the school culture through everything they do. They are the bridge between strategy and practice, and their influence on a child's school experience cannot be overstated.

As these roles are key to excellence at Blundell's we need to ask some questions:

- How do we ensure that our middle leaders are not just effective, but inspirational?
- How do we continue to improve what we offer by supporting those who lead from the middle?

The answer is straightforward: we invest in them, intentionally, strategically, and wholeheartedly.

WHY FOCUS ON MIDDLE LEADERSHIP?

We know from both research and experience that middle leaders are uniquely placed to shape the quality of day-to-day education. They are often the most visible leaders in a parent and pupil's school life. Whether it is the House Parent guiding pupils through challenges, the Head of Sixth Form helping make important A-Level choices, or the Head of Chemistry inspiring a love of learning, middle leaders create the culture and expectations that drive progress.

They are the:

- Biggest direct influence on staff performance and morale.
- Most important motivators within Departments and Houses.
- Strongest role models for the school's values and ethos.
- Vital link between senior leadership and frontline teaching.
- Culture builders who shape the ethical tone of their teams.
- Guides and mentors for early-career teachers who will shape classrooms for years to come.

Whether intentionally or accidentally, every leader leaves a legacy. Because middle leaders interact so frequently and closely with pupils and parents, their impact is both deep and lasting. Our programme aims to ensure that this legacy is intentional, meaningful, and positive.

OUR VISION: GROWING LEADERSHIP TO STRENGTHEN LEARNING

The Middle Leaders' Programme was born out of conversations between key senior leaders, who asked a simple but powerful question: *What do our middle leaders need to thrive?* From there, Vicki Gill, as Head of Staff Development, and the Staff Development Committee, took this vision and shaped it into a structured, six-term training programme that would deliver lasting impact.

We recognise that our middle leaders have their own unique skill sets and therefore any training should reflect this, and that developing leadership should not be reduced to one-off workshops or tick-box training. Instead, we needed something embedded, thoughtful, bespoke and strategic. The result is a rich blend of internally and externally led sessions, combining reflection, practical skills, and real-world application.

Each session is carefully designed to develop eight core competencies we believe are fundamental to outstanding middle leadership:

- Communication
- Organisation
- Empathy
- Problem Solving
- Mentoring and Motivation
- Planning
- Difficult Conversations
- Prioritisation and Well-being

These themes are explored across a structured six-term plan, and sessions are run ensuring that the busy lives of our teachers are respected, making use of INSET days, focused lunchtimes, and strategically timed training blocks.

THE PROGRAMME IN ACTION

Term 1: Reflecting on Who We Are

We began in Summer 2024 with a focus on *self-awareness*. Every participant completed the Clifton Strengths for Managers diagnostic, a powerful tool used worldwide to help professionals identify and build upon their innate leadership strengths. The results were personal, insightful, confidential, and designed to guide reflection and professional conversations between staff and their line managers.

Later in the term, Middle Leaders attended a ‘How to have a great development conversation’, led by an externally recruited company – Peopletopia. This helped Middle Leaders consider how to conduct truly meaningful PDR (Professional Development Review) conversations; our PDR process is part of our annual process for reflecting on staff progress and supporting professional growth. These sessions emphasised empathy, active listening, and empowering colleagues to take ownership of their own development. These skills not only strengthen individual conversations but also contribute to a culture of trust, motivation, and professional fulfilment across the school.

Term 2: Setting the Scene for Authentic Leadership

During INSET in September 2024, Bart Wielenga spoke on authentic leadership. His message was powerful: real leadership comes not from title or authority, but from integrity, self-awareness, and a willingness to be vulnerable and brave.

This was followed by an in-house session outlining the school’s evolving expectations of middle leaders. Key leaders led staff through a series of discussions to explore how we ‘manage down’ (leading our teams), ‘manage up’ (working with our line managers), and ‘manage ourselves’. These themes were developed into practical frameworks that staff could apply in their departments and houses, and the collaborative process encouraged a sense of ownership and shared purpose.

Term 3: Practical Tools for Leading with Confidence

The programme in Spring 2025 focussed on what often gets overlooked in leadership: well-being and prioritisation. We invited Peopletopia back for this training session to explore how leaders can make purposeful choices about where to focus their energy, time, and attention. Our middle leaders give so much to our school, and it is vital they also feel empowered to look after themselves.

This session explored how to manage workload without burnout, how to delegate effectively, and how to maintain energy and joy in leadership. Leadership is not just about being effective - it is also about being sustainable.

Term 4: Navigating the Tough Stuff

During Summer 2025 we will focus on an area that every leader must face at some point; *difficult conversations with colleagues*. Whether addressing concerns, offering constructive feedback, or managing sensitive discussions, our middle leaders must be equipped to approach these moments with clarity, compassion, and professionalism.

Matt Radley, Second Master, and a highly experienced leader within the school, will lead these sessions. Delivered in small, reflective groups during the quieter post-exam period, the training will provide not only strategies but also the space to explore real challenges and gain peer support.

Term 5: Leading Through Challenge and Change

In Autumn 2025, we plan to explore two essential leadership skills: problem solving and mentoring. These are not just managerial tasks; they are acts of trust and transformation. Whether supporting a new teacher or navigating a complex departmental issue, our middle leaders will be equipped with tools to lead with calm clarity and positive energy.

An external expert will guide the session, bringing insights from education and industry to help our team build confidence and capability in these core areas.

Term 6: Looking After What Matters Most

To conclude the programme in Spring 2026, our focus will shift to equipping Middle Leaders with the practical tools of leadership. They will take part in workshops on how to run effective meetings, and conduct interviews with confidence and professionalism. Led by external experts, these sessions will cover everything from setting a purposeful agenda to framing insightful interview questions. These skills are vital not only for successful recruitment, but also for fostering a culture in which staff feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to discussions and decisions.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF INTENTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Throughout the programme, we have been gathering ideas, reflecting on practice, and encouraging feedback. One powerful part of this has been the stakeholder lunches and discussion forums. Heads of Department, Houseparents, Heads of Year, and Prep colleagues have all taken part in shaping the expectations we hold of ourselves and each other. Together, we are building a shared language and a shared standard for leadership.

Key themes have emerged from these sessions; trust, communication, empathy, clarity, role modelling, and a sense that *children are always the priority*. These ideas are not just posters on a wall, they are the lived reality of what it means to be a leader at our school.

Every leader is encouraged to ask:

- How am I supporting and trusting my team?
- Am I managing my own time and energy wisely?
- Do I feel confident to speak up and contribute ideas?
- How does my leadership benefit pupils?

This reflective approach ensures that leadership development is not only for the benefit of staff, but also fundamentally about enhancing the pupil experience.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR YOUR CHILD

You may be wondering; what does all this mean for my child?

It means that:

- Their teachers are being led by people who feel valued, supported, and inspired.
- Their learning environment is shaped by leaders who are thoughtful, organised, and empathetic.
- Their school is constantly striving to get better, not through guesswork, but through evidence-informed, strategically planned development.
- Their role models, the adults they see every day, are leading with kindness, strength, and purpose.

This programme is not about theory. It is about action. It is about making sure that every aspect of our school runs with intention and heart. Because when staff are supported to be their best, pupils thrive.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

The first full cycle of the Middle Leaders' Programme will be completed in Spring 2026. After that, we plan to continue developing and refining the offer. New middle leaders will be welcomed into the programme, and optional "masterclass" sessions will be run each term for those who have already completed the core training. These sessions will be responsive to current needs and challenges, ensuring our leaders stay sharp and inspired.

We are also exploring how to align this programme with wider professional qualifications, and how to use the insight gained to feed into our wider school development priorities, as well as feeding into our ongoing training of Senior Leaders.

A SHARED COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

Our aim is this programme is simple, and echoes a theme that runs through many of our Thoughtful Thursdays essays: we are not standing still. We are constantly asking ourselves what more we can do to offer your children the best possible education; not just academically, but emotionally, socially, and morally.

Our investment in middle leadership is one of the most powerful ways we can do this. We are proud of the work that is already underway, and we are excited about the legacy it will create. As we grow our leaders, we grow our school and most importantly, we grow the potential of every child in our care.



DISAPPOINTMENT, SETBACKS AND FAILURE - PART 2

by Bart Wielenga

I am a Tottenham Hotspur (Spurs) supporter. For those of you who follow the Premier League, that may be all I need to say about disappointment.

As Spurs fans, we begin each season with a modicum of hope, but we never get too carried away. High expectations tend to end in bitter disappointment. Better to keep them low and be surprised by rare success.

Spurs have a wonderful motto: “To Dare Is To Do!” It could hardly be more fitting for a club that enters each season defying the odds, hoping this will be the year we win something—knowing full well we probably won’t. But isn’t that the point of supporting a team? That fragile balance between success and failure is exactly what keeps us invested. Often, it’s the epic comeback or the improbable victory that stays with us longest. A smooth path may bring a certain satisfaction, but it’s those who have flirted with catastrophe who truly understand the joy of success.

In the first part of this essay, I reflected on how our own relationship with disappointment affects the way we parent. Here, I want to focus more directly on why failure isn’t just inevitable—it’s essential for a young person’s development. I also want to offer some practical reflections on how we, as parents and educators, can help children navigate disappointment in a way that leaves them stronger, not more fragile.

THE UNCERTAINTY OF FAILURE

When something goes wrong for our child—whether it’s a falling-out with a friend, a failed exam, or a harsh word from a teacher—the problem is not just what happened. The real discomfort lies in the uncertainty of how the scenario ends. We see the pain or distress, and the outcome is uncertain. Will they bounce back? Will it damage their confidence? Is this the beginning of a pattern?

That uncertainty fuels our anxiety, which in turn triggers the instinct to intervene. By taking control, we believe we can manage the narrative and limit the damage. We try to steer things back on course before it’s too late. Sometimes this is necessary—especially if there is real harm—but often we step in not for our child’s sake, but to alleviate our own discomfort.

It’s easy to rationalise this intervention. We say we’re just helping, just supporting, just advocating. And sometimes we are. But there’s a fine line between walking alongside our children and walking in front of them. We need to ask: Whose anxiety are we soothing? Theirs—or ours?

Take, for instance, a teenager who’s made a mistake at school and ends up in detention. The details don’t matter: maybe they handed in work late, maybe they were rude, maybe they broke a rule. Whatever the issue, the child now faces a consequence. How we respond at this moment reveals something about us—and about how much faith we have in our child’s ability to cope.

Before acting, it’s worth pausing to ask: Is this about their wellbeing, or my need to stay in control? Do I believe they can handle it? Do I trust the school to be fair, proportionate, and thoughtful?

Our children learn not just from what we say, but from what we do in moments like this. If we step in immediately, they may feel protected—but they also hear another message: “I don’t think you can manage this on your own.” Over time, this can erode confidence and self-agency. It can undermine the very resilience we’re trying to build.

On the other hand, when we give them space to take ownership—to face a consequence, to apologise, to make amends—we’re offering them something far more valuable than a quick fix. We’re offering them dignity and agency.

WHY LEARNING TO COPE MATTERS

Much has been written about the life lessons that failure can teach. Paul Tough, in *How Children Succeed*, is especially eloquent on this point. He argues that when children aren’t given the opportunity to fail “productively and creatively,” they’re more likely to fall apart when they encounter real difficulty later in life. He calls this the ‘coddling’ effect. We think we’re being kind by shielding children from hardship, but in fact we’re denying them the chance to learn how to cope with it.

Failure is not a full stop; it’s a comma. It’s not the end of the sentence, let alone the end of the story. But children only learn that if we let them experience it.

Carol Dweck’s work on the growth mindset is another helpful lens. Her research shows that optimism and resilience are born from how children interpret failure. A child with a fixed mindset sees a bad mark as confirmation that they’re stupid. A child with a growth mindset sees it as a challenge—a sign that more effort is needed, but not that they’re incapable. The way they explain failure to themselves is often more important than the failure itself.

This internal dialogue doesn’t happen in isolation. Children learn how to interpret setbacks by watching how adults respond to them. If we panic, catastrophise, or rush in to smooth things over, they learn to fear failure. But if we stay calm, help them reflect, and give them space to grow, they learn that failure is something to be understood—not avoided at all costs.

THE FAILURE CURRICULUM

It may sound counterintuitive, but disappointment and failure offer some of the most valuable learning opportunities our children will ever encounter. They are not merely obstacles to be overcome; they are shaping forces that help build the very qualities we most hope to instill in our children. Let's explore a few of these.

Grit and Resilience One of the most important lessons failure teaches is how to bounce back. Children who experience setbacks begin to understand that persistence matters. Sometimes things are hard. Sometimes they require multiple attempts. Sometimes they don't go to plan, even after our best efforts. But that's no reason to stop trying.

In a culture that celebrates ease and instant gratification, it's more important than ever to remind children that effort and determination—"stickability"—are virtues. Struggle is not weakness. Teaching children that perseverance is a form of strength helps build true resilience.

Self-Knowledge and Awareness Failure fosters reflection and growth. Children who are supported through failure often become more self-aware. They begin to understand their limits, their instincts under pressure, and how they respond to adversity.

Optimists tend to find a story of growth within failure: "I know what I did wrong," or "Next time I'll try this." These quiet reframings plant the seeds of resilience. Over time, they build a confidence that comes not from avoiding failure, but from having faced it.

Perspective and Realism Children who know that life includes both wins and losses are better equipped for adulthood. They are less likely to be undone by a rejection letter or a poor performance. They understand that setbacks are not the end of the road—just a bend in it.

This grounded view builds perspective. It teaches children that neither success nor disappointment defines them—and that both are part of a much larger journey.

Empathy and Compassion Children who have known disappointment are often more compassionate. Having struggled themselves, they are less quick to judge and more likely to support others in quiet ways.

This isn't just about being kind. It's about emotional intelligence. A child who has faced difficulty is more likely to offer encouragement and to listen well. That capacity for empathy may be one of the most underrated outcomes of challenge.

Gratitude and Humility When children are always protected from failure, a sense of entitlement can quietly take root. But those who have struggled often approach life with more humility. They know success isn't guaranteed—and that others' achievements don't diminish their own. Such children are more likely to celebrate others without resentment, and to value their own wins, however small, with gratitude.

Discernment and Letting Go One uncomfortable but necessary truth failure teaches is that not everything is possible for everyone. This isn't defeatist—it's realistic. Effort matters. But so does discernment.

As Annie Duke writes in *Quit*: "Success does not lie in sticking to things. It lies in picking the right thing to stick to—and quitting the rest." Part of growing up is learning which pursuits deserve our energy—and when it's time to pivot.

Owning Mistakes and Forgiving Failure often involves hurt—sometimes of our own making. In those moments, children learn how to take responsibility and how to repair. Offering a sincere apology is a mark of maturity. So too is forgiveness—of others, and of ourselves. Holding onto shame or resentment can be paralyzing. But letting go, with grace, builds healthier relationships—with others, and with ourselves.

THE SUCCESS PARADOX

There are particular challenges we must remain mindful of in schools like Blundell's. Our children, by virtue of their context, are caught in what I would call a success paradox.

The real danger is not that they fail, but that they rarely truly do. In many ways, the world around them is built to protect them from failure. We have safety nets—pastoral care, academic support, well-resourced families—and these are good things. But they also mean that for most of our pupils, the day-to-day risks they face are not existential. Their lives are, relatively speaking, secure.

This is not to trivialise their challenges. It does hurt not to be invited to a party. It does matter when a dream doesn't come true, or when you're not chosen to sing the solo. Emotional pain is real, no matter the context. But we must also be honest: many of the struggles our young people face, though valid, are what we might gently call first world problems.

Hardships still come—no life is immune. Rejection stings. Plans fall apart. Bad things happen to good people, and to wealthy ones. But unless we intentionally allow space for our children to struggle and to stretch, we risk raising young people for whom life is too smooth, too managed, too easy.

There is another layer to this challenge, and it is more subtle: the fear of letting you down.

Our children grow up in environments where success is not only celebrated—it is expected. Many of our pupils attend Blundell's because you, their parents, have had success in life. They live in homes, communities, and cultures that echo that success. And while that is no bad thing, it comes with an unintended pressure: the unspoken (or sometimes spoken) assumption that they should follow suit.

In such a world, success does not feel optional—it feels like the only acceptable outcome. Children quickly learn the path: work hard, tick the boxes, follow the track. They don't necessarily have to "plough their own furrow"; instead, they follow the well-worn route that has already been mapped out for them.

Again, this is not about entitlement or laziness. Our students work hard. They are determined, ambitious, and capable. But when success feels preordained, the risk of failure starts to feel intolerable. Deviating from the expected path becomes dangerous. Why? Because the greatest disincentive to risk-taking is not laziness—it's fear. Specifically, the fear of disappointing those they love.

And that fear is very real. Even if it's not often articulated, the desire to please you, to live up to your hopes and sacrifices, can weigh heavily

on a young person. They may not say it out loud, but it shapes their choices. It can lead them to play it safe, to avoid ventures where failure is possible—even if growth might be greater.

I'm mindful that I, too, can unintentionally add to that weight. In my opening assembly of term, I often begin by reminding pupils how fortunate they are to be at Blundell's, and that it is beholden upon them to make the most of the opportunity they have been given. I believe this deeply.

In fact, I've said—perhaps too bluntly—that unless they do something meaningful with their Blundell's experience, all of this is just an indulgence.

I mean it sincerely. But I also recognise that to a teenage brain—where nuance is often in short supply—what they may hear is this: “You had better not mess this up.”

And that message, however well-intentioned, can land heavily.

THE LIGHTNESS OF THE BEGINNER

One of my favourite quotes comes from Steve Jobs, reflecting on being ousted from Apple:

“The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again.”

There's something deeply human in that idea. Success, for all its rewards, can weigh heavily. It can bring expectations, scrutiny, and fear. But the beginner feels light. The beginner has nothing to prove. They are free to try, to stumble, to explore.

Children need that lightness. They need permission to begin, not just to finish. To try, not just to achieve. To be playful, not always perfect. As parents and educators, our job is to create a culture in which they feel safe to experiment. That doesn't mean we eliminate challenge or lower expectations. It means we separate their identity from their performance. It means we cheer their courage, not just their outcomes.

A CONSIDERED RESPONSE

In his landmark book *Visible Learning*, educational researcher John Hattie evaluated the impact of various teaching strategies on student achievement. Among hundreds of interventions, one stood out above all others: self-efficacy. Put simply, students who believe their efforts can influence outcomes tend to make the most progress.

At Blundell's, we define self-efficacy as the belief that hard work leads to improvement. A child with high self-efficacy approaches challenges with confidence. They believe that with persistence, they can move forward. A child with low self-efficacy, by contrast, feels powerless. They are more likely to think, “There's no point trying—I just can't do it.” This echoes the ideas of Carol Dweck and Paul Tough discussed earlier.

Self-efficacy is not just about academic success—it is also central to resilience. A setback feels overwhelming to a child with low self-efficacy; it confirms their belief that they are helpless. But a child with high self-efficacy sees failure as part of the process. They believe they can adapt, learn, and improve. They have agency. They bounce back.

At Blundell's, we see self-efficacy as the most important of our six ‘levers’ for successful learning. It underpins everything else.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Helping your child develop self-efficacy means giving them space to cope, and to grow. As parents, it's tempting to step in—to smooth the path, fix the problem, or shield them from discomfort. But if we always rescue, we deny them the chance to build belief in their own ability to handle difficulty. Teenagers especially need to know that they can face challenges and come through them.

This doesn't mean stepping away entirely. It means stepping alongside. We become mentors rather than managers. We can ask good questions, offer perspective, and share our own experiences. But the work—and the growth—must be theirs.

Some practical ways to support self-efficacy:

1. Praise effort and courage, not just results.
2. Let your child take the lead: ask, “What do you want to do about it?”
3. Offer help on their terms: “What do you need from me?”
4. Model resilience in your own life—own mistakes and move forward.
5. Celebrate the willingness to try, even when things don't go to plan.
6. Be aware of whose disappointment you're feeling—yours, or theirs?
7. Love unconditionally. Let your child know their worth isn't tied to success.

At the heart of this reflection lies a simple truth: failure is not fatal. Nor is it final. It is a chapter, not the whole story. But in order for our children to see it that way, we must help them to see it that way. We must create the kind of homes and schools and communities where mistakes are not feared but understood as part of the journey.

We don't need to orchestrate failure. Life will bring its own share. But we do need to step back enough to let our children experience it. Not unkindly. Not without support. But with just enough space that they can begin to discover their own ability to process, to learn, to bounce back.

Because one day, when we're not there to fix it for them, they'll need to know that they can. And they'll remember—not that we solved every problem—but that we believed they could stand, and grow, and try again.



LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM: OUTDOOR PURSUITS

by Doug Morrison

INTRODUCTION

I have been fortunate to be involved in many of the different outdoor activities that we offer our pupils at Blundell's. From Ten Tors on Dartmoor, to the highest mountain on Borneo, I have been placed amongst pupils putting themselves outside of their comfort zone more times than I can remember. I've had the opportunity to observe the rapid development of skills and character that these uneasy times can cause, and the enjoyment of watching individuals grow in these conditions provides endless motivation to keep organising the next opportunity.

In an era when education is often benchmarked by examination results and league tables, it is easy to forget that opportunities for learning can be found well beyond our school campus. Our pupils can often be found in some of the worst conditions imaginable, with freezing rain flying full in their faces, with difficult terrain to navigate or with emergencies to deal with. These moments often teach them the most about themselves and represent an important opportunity for Blundellians to develop during their time with us.

Although these experiences often require a large investment of time, both on the part of pupil and teacher, I have never come away from an event feeling that time has been wasted. Outdoor opportunities are education in its richest form. They offer a powerful approach to fostering our pupils to develop skills of empathy, resilience, curiosity, a spirit of collaboration, and a strong sense of purpose. In this essay I am looking to reflect upon five developmental areas that I believe are important to our school and demonstrate how these areas are supported by our Outdoor Education offering at Blundell's.

1. MORAL AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

In a world that often celebrates confidence and ambition, there is quiet strength in those young people who lead with kindness, humility, and respect. These areas are not usually the first aspects of development that come to mind when thinking about outdoor pursuits. More commonly the first thought would be to physical development. But in the unrelenting day of an academic timetable, rushing between classrooms to get to the next subject to be studied, we can often lose sight of helping others navigate their way through the challenges of life. Opportunities away from the frenetic pace of the school day can often provide improved chances of addressing these areas of development.

Over the past decade, under the management of Mr Dawe, the school has built a reputation of being one of the most successful Duke of Edinburgh providers in the southwest. The scheme, at its heart, is designed to help participants make principled decisions, show empathy, and take responsibility for their actions. Through volunteering, participants engage directly with their communities, gaining insight into the needs and challenges of others. This nurtures compassion and a sense of moral duty, as pupils are often placed in unfamiliar contexts that require them to act ethically, consider the consequences of their actions, and reflect on their role in society. By contributing meaningfully to causes beyond themselves, pupils begin to form a stronger moral compass, rooted in service, fairness and respect.

In addition, the Duke of Edinburgh scheme helps young people build emotional resilience and self-awareness. The physical and expedition sections of the award are designed to challenge pupils in ways that test their perseverance, patience and ability to manage emotions under pressure. Working in teams, often in remote or demanding environments, requires pupils to navigate conflict, support others and regulate their own emotional responses. This leads to greater maturity, as they learn to stay calm in adversity, empathise with teammates and recover from setbacks. These experiences collectively enhance pupils' emotional intelligence, preparing them for personal and professional relationships later in life.

With over 70 per cent of pupils in Year 9 at Blundell's achieving their Bronze award, 40 per cent in Year 10 achieving their Silver award and 10-15 every year achieving the most prestigious Gold award, a significant number of pupils are leaving us having grown in many of the areas that the Duke of Edinburgh scheme hopes to nurture.

It is not possible to "teach" these skills in a classroom and as a teacher involved in the award, as well as a parent of children at the school who have achieved Gold and Silver awards, I am incredibly impressed by the empathy that all involved in the scheme show upon completing it.

2. CRITICAL THINKING AND INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

Education should aim for more than exam success. It should inspire pupils to question, reflect, and engage deeply with the world around them. While qualifications open doors, it is critical thinking that allows young people to navigate those new spaces with purpose and integrity. Our responsibility as educators is not only to teach content but to nurture curiosity, encourage thoughtful dialogue, and help pupils understand their agency in shaping the future.

For nearly ten years, I have had the opportunity to run and embark upon expeditions around the world with my colleague, Mr. Olive, together with the organisation, World Challenge. Their trips encourage pupils to engage deeply with unfamiliar environments and cultures, prompting them to consider how different communities live and interact with the world around them. Through immersive experiences, such as collaborating on sustainability projects, navigating remote terrains, or working alongside local organisations, pupils are exposed to a range of global

issues including poverty, climate change, education inequality, and conservation. These encounters challenge preconceived notions, broaden perspectives, and encourage pupils to critically reflect on the social, environmental, and economic factors that shape the lives of others around the world.

By actively participating in the planning and execution of their expedition, pupils are required to think independently and take ownership of complex decisions, from budgeting and logistics to teamwork and leadership. This process fosters self-awareness and helps pupils evaluate their own impact, both during the trip and more broadly in their everyday lives. As they confront real-world challenges and see the consequences of action and inaction, they are made to think critically about their responsibilities as global citizens and how they can contribute meaningfully to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Our international experiences involving nearly 100 pupils have seen us visit many parts of the world. We have been to the dense jungle of Borneo staying with communities in longhouses, we have taken in the cultural marvels of Machu Picchu and the Colca Canyon in Peru and, most recently, experienced Southern Africa in all its beauty, including visiting Kruger national park and the stunning beaches of Mozambique. Whilst taking in these famous wonders, pupils are very much led on a path of engagement with local people, far from the tourist trail.

The development of pupils on these trips is profound, as many experience poverty and different cultures for the first time. Confronted with unfamiliar environments, pupils are encouraged to question their assumptions and reflect on their own values and lifestyle. Encountering communities that thrive despite limited resources prompts thoughtful comparisons with life back home, challenging simplistic narratives around wealth, happiness, and success.

Whether navigating a local market, working on a community project, or listening to the stories of hosting communities, participants are constantly required to adapt, analyse and respond thoughtfully. This kind of experiential learning fosters critical thinking in a way that few classroom experiences can replicate, leaving pupils not only more worldly and empathetic but also more inquisitive and independent in their thinking.

Many pupils will remark upon the curiosity that these expeditions have given them about the world around us. I am incredibly heartened to hear of story after story from returning Old Blundellians of further adventures that they have had around the world, inspired by the first taste of travel that they received at school.

3. PERSEVERANCE AND SELF-AWARENESS

As Mr Wielenga has written, failure can be seen as something to be feared or avoided, but in truth, it is an essential part of meaningful learning. When pupils encounter setbacks, they gain more than just experience, they develop resilience, humility, and a deeper understanding of themselves. Embracing failure as a natural part of growth helps build the character and determination needed not only for academic success but for life beyond the classroom.

We are exceptionally fortunate in the southwest to have the Ten Tors challenge on Dartmoor right on our doorstep. It is an opportunity for pupils to develop an awareness of the need to support others in a way that is unique to outdoor challenges.

Although team sports on offer at Blundell's provide an opportunity for individuals to work together, the individual nature of performance in sport can see players focusing on themselves rather than supporting others to achieve a collective goal. The Ten Tors challenge is a tough and physically demanding event where individuals cannot be substituted. If the teams are to succeed, they must all succeed together.

In the May event, those taking part are grouped together in teams of six and given around 20 hours over two days to walk 35, 45 or 55 miles over the unforgiving terrain of Dartmoor. Teams must be self-supported and be prepared for all possible weather conditions, which in May has included snow, heatwaves, torrential downpours and floods and times of zero visibility. This results in almost unbearably heavy backpacks before the challenge even begins.

The training for the event is extensive and requires pupils to commit to many weekend training sessions for a period of up to eight months before the event. Pupils must ensure that they work together and support each other through difficult conditions and physical stresses. It really is a more intense version of the Physical and Expedition sections of the Duke of Edinburgh scheme.

Having run Ten Tors for several years and now watching it being skilfully managed under the watchful eye of Mr Dawe, I am acutely aware of the frustration that is caused to pupils who do not quite make it to the final weekend. The risky nature of the event means the organisers must, understandably, place limits on the number of places on offer. It is a greatly oversubscribed event.

The most difficult part, by far, of running the challenge for the school, is the moment when you must tell individuals who have given their all, that they haven't quite made the cut for a place on a team. We are very fortunate at Blundells that we can choose from a pool of individuals, all of whom could complete the event if they have completed the training.

Whilst Year 10 pupils often see this moment in time as a 'failure', many return two years later, absolutely determined to give it a go again. To put themselves through another eight months of training and win the opportunity to be able to say that they completed Ten Tors. This tenacity is remarkable and greatly beneficial to the future success of our charges.

All pupils who take part in Ten Tors should be immensely proud of the physical demands that they are putting themselves through, whether they make it into the final teams or not. Watching pupils return to school visibly tired the day after a training walk or after the main event, we as teachers look on with awe at the commitment that they have taken on to put themselves in significant discomfort, albeit temporary.

4. COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY

At its best, education shapes individuals who look beyond themselves, who value community, care for others, and measure success not just by personal gain but by the wellbeing they help foster in those around them. Schools should nurture a sense of responsibility and service, encouraging pupils to contribute meaningfully to the lives of others. In doing so, we prepare young people not only for careers, but for citizenship grounded in empathy, cooperation, and purpose.

All the outdoor education opportunities that we offer help young people develop a strong sense of community and a willingness to serve others. These experiences take pupils beyond the classroom and place them in situations where teamwork, resilience and mutual support are essential. Whether navigating Dartmoor in challenging conditions or contributing to a community project abroad, pupils learn to rely on and care for one another. They begin to appreciate that their actions can have a direct impact on the wellbeing of those around them, and that shared hardship often builds stronger, more compassionate communities.

Through these programmes, pupils also broaden their understanding of success. While physical endurance, problem-solving and independence are all fostered, what often stands out most is the collective achievement, reaching a summit together, completing a trek as a team, or making a difference in a local community overseas. These shared experiences help pupils recognise that personal growth is enriched when it contributes to the good of the group. Outdoor education, in this way, supports the school's aim of shaping individuals who not only strive for excellence themselves but who also support others in their journey.

5. PURPOSE AND MEANING

In the rush to measure progress, we can lose sight of education's deeper purpose. Beyond the metrics lies a profound mission: to help young people discover who they are, what they value, and how they might lead meaningful lives. True education nurtures character as well as intellect, guiding pupils not just toward achievement, but toward purpose, integrity, and a sense of what it means to live well.

All of our outdoor education experiences come together to help us achieve this goal. The Ten Tors Challenge fosters resilience, self-reliance and teamwork, qualities that help young people find purpose beyond academic achievement. When pupils navigate difficult terrain on Dartmoor, they develop inner strength, perseverance and a sense of responsibility for themselves and others. These challenges build confidence through experience and show participants they can overcome obstacles through commitment and collaboration, nurturing a deeper belief in their own potential and purpose.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme provides structured opportunities for pupils to engage in service, skill-building and physical activity. Each section of the award encourages young people to give back to their communities, learn something new and commit to personal development. Through volunteering, for example, pupils learn empathy and compassion, fundamental traits of good people. The scheme gives pupils space to grow into reflective, socially aware individuals who take pride in contributing positively to the lives of others.

World Challenge expeditions take pupils outside their comfort zones and immerse them in unfamiliar cultures and environments. These experiences foster global citizenship and cultural sensitivity, helping pupils understand the broader world and their role in it. Whether contributing to community projects or budgeting and planning for their expedition, participants develop leadership, integrity and a sense of shared humanity. Such experiences prompt young people to reflect on what matters most, guiding them towards lives filled with meaning, service and purpose.

I have had the pleasure of seeing many pupils develop through these three avenues of opportunity, but I also have to acknowledge that there are many other small scale outdoor pursuit offerings that many of my colleagues deliver across the school, as activities, for individual year groups or for tutor groups. While I cannot name each example here individually, all of them have one common aim: to provide those in our care with opportunities to find purpose. Even more than this, they help pupils to understand what matters most to them, to feel grounded, motivated, and connected to the world around them.

CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

Of course, Outdoor Education presents obstacles. It requires time, resources, and careful planning to ensure safety and inclusivity. It may be perceived as non-essential or elitist. But to sideline it is to ignore one of the most powerful tools for holistic development. Schools must be intentional in how they design, fund, and integrate these experiences, viewing them not as extras, but as essentials.

We are very fortunate at Blundell's to have the flexibility in our curriculum, as well as the support from leadership, parents and pupils alike, to be able to run outdoor pursuits as an integral part of our education provision. Countless pupils have left the school greatly enriched by their involvement in activities outside of the classroom and many have returned to reflect on how these experiences have defined their future careers or inspired them to go on to further impressive achievements in their lives.

When individuals return like this, wanting to tell their tales of the positive impact that involvement in outdoor activities at school had on them, that is when you can be reassured that you are on the right educational path.

CONCLUSION

Outdoor Education is not a luxury or an indulgence; it is a vital part of forming intelligent, purposeful learners. It enables pupils to grow in ways that classrooms alone cannot achieve. In resilience, empathy, critical thought, collaboration, and reflection, they find not only themselves, but a deeper sense of what it means to live wisely and well. As a school, our responsibility is to provide such opportunities and to value the learning that happens beyond classroom walls. We are fortunate to have support for this principle at Blundell's and an outstanding outdoor pursuit offering as a result.



A REFLECTION ON TEACHER TRAINING AT BLUNDELL'S SCHOOL

by Hannah Perrin-Haynes

LIFE BEFORE TEACHING

When you follow the path of academic English Literature, there are certain inevitabilities. One of them is the question: do you want to be a teacher? My answer was always a resounding no. My obsession with words was, in truth, a selfish one; I was too busy enjoying expanding my own understanding to worry about the understanding of those younger than me.

But working at the Bodleian library while studying literature only partially pays the bills and other opportunities were starting to cross my path. Eventually, I moved to London to work on strategic policy development in the Department for Education, at an interesting time of political change when Gordon Brown was moving out and the coalition was moving in. From there, I shifted to cultural strategy with the Scottish Government, witnessing the increasing clamour of the independence movement. Later, I took up a diplomatic posting at the British Consulate in Toronto, championing Scottish cultural and business interests across North America. All the while, I continued my PhD in modernist collaborative identities. My love for literature endured. In fact, it intensified. The further I strayed from academia, the more I missed it. For all the influence of policy, strategy and diplomacy, the impact never quite felt tangible enough. Then, someone asked me again: would you ever consider becoming a teacher? And this time, to my own surprise, I said yes.

THE CASE FOR TEACHING

Teaching has become an increasingly attractive option for career changers. It offers intellectual fulfilment, personal purpose and a profound opportunity to make a difference. Age is no barrier; indeed, life experience enhances your capacity to teach with empathy, clarity and conviction. A recent article in *The Times* reported a 67% rise in over-50s starting teacher training over the past two years, even as total trainee numbers across all age groups dropped by 2% in England. The charity *Now Teach*, which exists to attract and recruit experienced and successful people to change career into teaching, states that since 2017, they have supported more than 1,100 later-stage career changers into teaching, focusing on recruiting those who can teach shortage subjects like languages and STEM to help fill critical gaps in schools across England. Their CEO, Graihagh Crawshaw-Sadler, told *The Times*: "The post-Covid years have accelerated this trend as talented individuals seek a career that gives back."

For me, the appeal was about impact. I wanted to share my passion for literature, not just in abstract academic spaces but in real classrooms with real students, shaping how they see the world and themselves. That is where *Blundell's* came in: part of a teaching school alliance, renowned for offering an employment-based training route that produces excellent teachers and the chance to teach and train simultaneously, gaining classroom experience while earning the qualification. Applying for the job turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made.

TRAINING AT BLUNDELL'S

On arrival at *Blundell's*, I was welcomed into a structured, thoughtful and deeply supportive training environment. It soon became clear that the practice of training teachers is part of the bread and butter of the school. Vicki Gill, as the Director of Staff Development, made the process seamless, always available for questions and offering invaluable pedagogical insights. I was mentored with care and dedication by the highly experienced Emily Worthington, who guided me not only through the mechanics of the classroom but also through the more subtle nuances of teaching. Alongside the pedagogical training, I was coached in pastoral care by Sarah Holman, who taught me the intricacies and unique demands of working within a boarding school environment. It soon became clear that this holistic view of education — intellectual and emotional, academic and pastoral — is woven into the fabric of life at *Blundell's*.

My teaching timetable comprised of Years 8, 9, 10 and 12 and I quickly learned that classroom theory and classroom reality are two very different beasts, but the training programme bridged the two with care. We studied child development, behaviour management, SEND inclusion and emotional regulation. Everything I learned could be implemented the next day. My placement at *Uffculme School* allowed me to experience a different context and compare approaches, enriching my understanding, and I was supported by Belinda Jones, who was one year ahead of me on the course and she shared her wisdom generously.

The academic underpinning of the course was rigorous and my out-of-school training came via the University of Buckingham, whose blended learning model allowed me to develop academically while practicing practically on-the-job at school. Trainees are expected not just to learn how to teach, but to understand why strategies work. That intellectual curiosity suited me. There was a requirement to maintain a comprehensive evidence tracker that detailed the ways in the eight teachers' standards were being demonstrated. Any gaps identified in the tracker, or areas for improvement arising from the frequent lesson observations, were then addressed by a targeted programme of support. At no point are you left floundering during teacher training at *Blundell's*. They keep a close eye on you and make sure you are not just developing but also flourishing. Alongside this aspect of the course, which results in Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), I completed the full PGCE, researching my own practice and engaging deeply with wider educational philosophy. This kind of reflective academic engagement fosters growth beyond the checklist of teacher standards. It makes you a professional, not just a practitioner.

What sets the Blundell's model apart is its emphasis on autonomy and identity. I wasn't a passive observer in classrooms. I was encouraged to develop my own lessons, my own voice and my own philosophy. I observed colleagues across departments, learning from their methods, borrowing their strategies, building a mosaic of ideas that would form my own teaching identity.

SUPPORT BEYOND QTS

I was among the first cohorts to embark on the newly extended two-year Early Career Teacher (ECT) programme introduced following a government consultation. Designed to offer prolonged and meaningful support, the structure has been one of the most important aspects of my ongoing development. Regular observations, feedback loops and peer review kept me growing.

At Blundell's, professional development doesn't stop with your PGCE certificate. It's embedded in the culture. In our department, feedback is continuous and non-hierarchical, thanks to initiatives introduced by Kate Borgen-Davis. Furthermore, we contribute to and learn from the annual Blundell's Research Journal, attend Nick Lecharpentier's excellent learning forums and constantly share best practice. Teaching is collaborative, not competitive. We are as committed to each other's growth as we are to our pupils'.

THE PUPIL EXPERIENCE

One of the key benefits of a teacher training programme within a school like Blundell's is what it offers to the students. Trainees bring fresh ideas, new perspectives and renewed enthusiasm. They reflect regularly, adapt quickly and learn constantly. Pupils benefit from this dynamic engagement. They see that learning is never finished, that their teachers are learners too.

Furthermore, many career-changers bring a depth of professional experience and life context that enriches lessons beyond the textbook. We can link theory to practice, literature to lived experience. We can model resilience, adaptability and curiosity and we are living proof that it's never too late to follow your passion.

As I reflect on my time at Blundell's, now at the end of my fifth year, I realise how seamlessly my former experiences have found their place in my teaching life. My background in government and diplomacy has enhanced my Politics teaching, my work on strategy informs my contributions to the SH and Pastoral reviews and I am able to offer A-Level enrichment that helps pupils connect their academic learning to real-world contexts, including trips to local hustings, Mock General Elections, Model United Nations and creative writing days. Having studied at five different universities around the world informs my role as the International Universities coordinator and I take great pride in supporting pupils in securing places at world-class institutions. Also, my work on the Extended Project Qualification team, teaching academic skills such as critical thinking, evaluating sources and ensuring investigations are underpinned by robust research, supports pupils with having the skills they will need at university and beyond.

This is one of the things I value most about Blundell's. The school recognises and makes the most of what its staff have to offer. You are not just a teacher of your subject; you are a whole person whose experiences, ideas and passions are welcomed and harnessed.

LOOKING AHEAD

There are days when I think back to Embassy events in Washington or Ministerial meetings in Whitehall with a pang. Those were exciting times. But I wouldn't trade them for what I have now. Not for the pupil whose eyes glimmer when they get a taste of Shakespeare's genius. Not for the heartfelt essays handed in by students who swore they hated poetry. Not for the dyslexic pupil who finally believes they are good enough.

The classroom is where I am meant to be and Blundell's is the reason I am the teacher I have become.



OUR CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION

by Stuart Alred

Politicians, priests, and the public debate whether we still live in a "Christian country." One thing is clear: Christianity is in decline in the UK, particularly among young people. This raises important questions for us to consider. Why do we, at Blundell's, continue to stand on our Christian foundation? Why do we gather in Chapel each morning, sing hymns, and participate in Christian festivals? And why do we continue to offer students and staff opportunities to develop personal faith? The short essay proposes that we do so because it is good.

ENRICHING TRADITIONS

When Old Blundellians visit the school or recall their time here, Chapel often ranks high among their treasured memories. For many, Chapel is the heartbeat of the school. This is where we come together, where we sing, where we are reminded of our shared story. It is a space for inspiration, challenge, and reflection, providing a meaningful start to our day. Pew Research (2019) reports that people who attend religious services tend to be happier and many self-help experts emphasize the importance of a strong daily routine. Chapel at Blundell's offers both. Regardless of faith background, all are welcomed in Chapel and encouraged to consider life more deeply than the rest of a busy school day allows.

Our special services continue to provide moments of meaning and tradition, shaping people of good character giving us 'roots' and a sense of being grounded. Remembrance services at Blundell's allow students to reflect on themes of sacrifice, duty, and gratitude. The names on the walls of those who have gone before us serve as a poignant reminder of the legacy and history that Blundellians inherit, encouraging reflection on the contributions and sacrifices of past generations. Together we sing 'we kneel where are fore-fathers knelt, they trod these courts before us.' The message of light in darkness and hope in challenge—found in the wonder of Christmas and the beauty of Carols by Candlelight—reminds us of love, friendship, and togetherness. These values remain as important as ever, and we are pleased to see the Chapel overflowing on such occasions.

OUR CHRISTIAN ROOTS

Peter Blundell built our school on the belief that education should be intertwined with Christian principles. These principles have profoundly shaped some of our most treasured values. We believe every person has equal worth because, according to Christianity, every individual is made in God's image and possesses inherent dignity. The well-known Christian teaching, "Love thy neighbour as thyself," has inspired countless people to treat others with kindness and respect. We remain committed to the dignity and worth of each person.

As Blundellians enter an ever-changing world, they benefit from knowing where we have come from, how we arrived here, and where we should seek to go next. Historian Tom Holland argues in his book *Dominion* that many of the moral values that shaped modern Western society have deep Christian roots such as mercy, charity and concern for the marginalised. These ideals align with what are commonly regarded as "British values" and are also broadly reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Christianity provides not only moral guidance but also an anchor for understanding why these values exist and where they have come from. It is important for our students to trace this source from the past to help guide them and inspire 'wings' of aspiration into the future.

A DIVERSE FUTURE

If we wish to understand our world and its people, we must understand Christianity. In global terms, Christianity is not declining—it is migrating. Over the last century, South America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania have seen millions of new Christians. The majority of the world's Christians live in the Global South, with over 600 million in South America and 600 million in Africa. In the UK, Christianity is currently growing in London, largely due to immigration. Around of the third of the people on our planet identify as 'Christian'.

Religious literacy and empathy will enable young people to relate to others, appreciate diverse perspectives, and contribute to a harmonious society. Friends, neighbours, colleagues and bosses will likely be 'religious' and we want our students to be well practised at building positive relationships through genuine understanding. Our students enter a future shaped by multiple religions, spiritual traditions, and secular worldviews and within that, Christianity remains the world's largest therefore our students can only benefit from a reasonable depth of understanding.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Our Christian foundation motivates us to embrace, support, and encourage people of all faiths and none, in critical thinking. Our minds are a gift and should be developed through wisdom, knowledge and truth. Our Religious Studies department explores the major world religions with academic rigour. Early in the school, we teach Ethics, Philosophy, Islam, and Buddhism. At GCSE, we compare Christianity with modern

secular views, while at A-Level, we explore Philosophy, Ethics, and the Development of Christian Thought through OCR's excellent resources.

Our Religious Studies department does not seek to persuade students to adopt a particular belief but rather to encourage them to think well about beliefs. We seek to shape settings where people can be true to their own perspectives whilst also being open to listen and learn to others. We believe that warm, generous, healthy, diverse debate, agreement and disagreement are important for education and also for a healthy pluralist society. We have a deep and genuine respect for the integrity and insight of other traditions, beliefs and for the freedom of religious belief for everyone.

PERSONAL FAITH

"Flush of morn divine, Thy Son proclaimed Thee nearer" we sing in our school hymn, written by A.L. Francis (Headteacher 1874–1917). This hymn proposes, that in Jesus, Thy Son, God has moved closer to us. It claims that God is real and that we can understand Him by learning about Jesus. At Blundell's those who wish to explore personal faith and belief have an opportunity to do so in such a way that promotes individual choice and intellectual curiosity. Additional groups and events, such as 'Open Door' on Friday nights, provide a welcoming space for students to discuss faith, ask questions, and build friendships in a relaxed setting.

Several Christian parents support the school through prayer, seeking blessing on the lives of our students. Research from the Templeton Foundation suggests that prayer has positive effects on those who engage in it. By faith, we believe that our prayers also bring blessings to the school. Christianity is not imposed at Blundell's; rather, it is presented as an opportunity for reflection, discussion, and discovery. Those who identify as Christian find support and encouragement, while others learn to live in a community where different beliefs are respected, contributing to an environment of mutual understanding and enrichment.

CONCLUSION

The Christian foundation of Blundell's remains firm as we honour our history and traditions. We are not owners; we are stewards of something truly special. We respect the roots of our values and handle them with honest enquiry. We explore faith not with dogmatism but with curiosity, as we navigate the mysteries of life together. Our hymns, the creeds of the Church, Christians and even the Scriptures could be mistaken. But we believe we are better for having considered them with intellectual integrity.

As Blundellians are prepared for the challenges that life brings, they may yet find that the firm foundation on which this school stands is the firmest ground for their own lives as well. If not, the journey of our traditions, questions, opportunities and understanding remain good for each student.



THE DISCIPLINE OF CHANGE: HOW SCHOOLS CAN REVIEW, IMPLEMENT AND REFLECT WITH PURPOSE

by Charles List

At the heart of every excellent school lies a commitment to growth; not only the growth of the pupils we serve, but of the school itself. In education, standing still is not a neutral act; it is a decision to fall behind. But how do schools change intentionally and productively? How do we review our provision, implement meaningful improvements, and ensure that change leads to better outcomes for pupils?

This week's essay offers an insight into that process. It explains how we conduct thoughtful, evidence-informed reviews of our work, make changes with clarity and purpose, and embed a culture of ongoing reflection. I draw on the Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) *A School's Guide to Implementation*, viewed through the lens of our own experience here at Blundell's.

This is not a technical essay, it is a human one. Because improving a school is not just about strategies or data. It is about values, relationships, and a shared determination to get better for the improved experience of our pupils.

WHY REVIEW ANYTHING AT ALL?

A good school does not change for the sake of change. It changes because it listens; to its pupils, to its staff, to emerging research, and to the evolving world beyond its gates. Sometimes this means reviewing an academic programme, a pastoral system or a co-curricular offering. Sometimes the change is prompted by data but, more often, it is prompted by a question: *Could we do this better?*

We do not get everything right the first time, but nor should we expect to. As our pupils grow and the world around them shifts, our school must keep pace; not reactively, but thoughtfully.

At its best, school improvement is not a matter of reacting to trends or adopting the latest innovation. It is a thoughtful and principled journey, a process rooted in what a school truly stands for, informed by data and research, and open to learning from others. It is not simply what we change that matters, but how and why we choose to change.

At Blundell's, this understanding underpins every review we undertake. We understand that, although the urge to fix things quickly is understandable, meaningful change rarely happens overnight; thinking fast and acting slowly is more effective.

In this essay, I want to share how we at Blundell's thoughtfully approached the review of School House, our structure for pupils in Years 7 and 8. After five years of running it in its current form, we wanted to know: is this model still serving our pupils as well as it could? I will explain how we went about the review, how we started making changes, and how we are evaluating whether those changes are working.

I use School House as the example here because it is the review of which we are currently in the midst. However, I could just as easily have chosen the curriculum review that ran from 2017 to 2023, the ongoing pastoral review, or the newly launched co-curricular review. At Blundell's, we believe that a good school is a restless one; always reflecting, always questioning, and always seeking to improve its practice.

At the heart of all our reviews lie three guiding principles: staying true to our values, intelligent use of evidence, and an eagerness to learn from, and collaborate with, others.

1. STARTING FROM VALUES

Every meaningful review begins with a clear articulation of a school's values. Values are not window dressing, they shape the questions we ask, the outcomes we prioritise, and the practices we choose to adopt. Before rushing to action, we invest time in fully understanding the issue.

In the case of School House, we returned to first principles. We asked: "What are we trying to protect? What are we trying to preserve? What matters most for our pupils? What is the purpose of the first two years at the Senior School?"

We identified a range of drivers for change, from logistical considerations to deeper cultural questions, but our focus remained firmly on the pupil experience. Our aim was to ensure that these formative years were shaped by the lived values expressed in Roots and Wings, and defined by clarity, kindness, coherence, and ambition.

2. GATHERING EVIDENCE: LOOKING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Once values frame the process, the next step is to gather evidence, as change should not begin with a hunch. A good review is rigorous and avoids leaping to solutions before fully understanding the problem. This involves looking both inward and outward and the understanding that no single piece of data tells the whole story, but together, they offer a picture.

Internally, we draw on a wide range of sources: performance data, staff input, lesson observations, Pupils and parents are key in this diagnostic process. Their insights help build a shared understanding and encourage later buy-in. When people feel that their voice has shaped the analysis, they are more likely to support the solutions. Most importantly, this ensures this phase is collaborative. Schools are communities and, if you want to understand what is really happening, you must listen to those at the centre of it.

Externally, we engage with research, and we enjoy the great privilege that comes with visiting other schools. The questions we ask are: "What can we learn from elsewhere? What are we already doing well? What can we adapt for our own context? What has worked in similar contexts? What does research suggest is most effective? What are the core components of a successful approach? And, crucially, how do these align with the values of our school?" This is not about importing a programme wholesale. It is about learning from elsewhere, then tailoring wisely.

I invited staff to volunteer for the School House review team and selected 10 colleagues from over 25 who expressed interest from a mix of departments and responsibilities. This group met regularly and took part in three dedicated 'away days', where we stepped off-site to think deeply and creatively about what we wanted for our youngest pupils. We consulted widely internally, holding forums with pupils and staff across both the Prep and Senior School. We launched a detailed parent survey, and over 90 families responded. Their feedback was both generous and insightful, affirming much of what we were doing well while also raising important questions: "Why do pupils in Year 7 see so many different teachers? Could transitions between Year 6 and Year 9 be smoother? Could the curriculum be better balanced? Can we help them manage prep, given how tired pupils are when they start at the Senior School?"

We also visited eight very different institutions, including stand-alone prep schools, academically selective and non-selective schools, all-through schools, and those with particularly vibrant Key Stage 3 programmes, across both the independent and state sectors.

The result was a shared diagnosis of the challenges and a clear consensus around what needed to improve.

3. PREPARING FOR CHANGE

We then move into the preparation phase. This is arguably the most important stage because clarity, alignment, and planning make success far more likely.

Once a course of action is agreed, the review team prepares the ground. This involves careful planning: identifying the key people involved, allocating time and resources, agreeing how the impact will be measured, and ensuring that everyone understands not just what is happening, but why.

We begin by articulating a clear rationale: why this change matters, what it hopes to achieve, and how it connects to our values. Next, we define exactly what will change. We specify the "core components" - the essential elements that must be in place for the change to work.

Then, we plan for support. This means designing high-quality professional development, allocating time for collaboration, anticipating barriers, and agreeing how progress will be monitored. Implementation plans are not static documents; they evolve as we learn what works.

We therefore set out to explain why the changes to School House were necessary and how they aligned with our values. We designed a coherent plan that placed Tutors at the centre of daily life, improved curriculum continuity and smoothed the transition from Year 6 to Year 7 by redrawing the timetable to prioritise Maths, English and Science, and from Year 8 to Year 9 by strengthening opportunities for enrichment and leadership. We rethought the structure of the day completely to make better use of the time and new specialist coaches available. Prep was reshaped to be more manageable and meaningful, reducing the amount of stress at home when pupils start at a busy Senior School. New ambassador and captaincy roles gave Year 8 pupils a greater sense of ownership and responsibility and more parent contact points were introduced to create a more seamless integration process.

Communication here is crucial. When everyone understands both the "what" and the "why," the "how" becomes far more manageable. We ran parent forums to explain the process and the changes, and Heads of Year fed back to pupils. Explanations were shared not only through formal channels, but also through the quiet, daily conversations that build trust and help people feel part of the journey.

4. DELIVERING THOUGHTFULLY

The biggest risk during delivery stage is speed. There is a temptation to push quickly - especially when a change feels exciting or overdue. But lasting improvement takes time. It needs modelling, feedback, support, and patience. New practices rarely embed after one INSET session.

This is where the human side of change matters most. Implementation is not a checklist, rather it is a social process, shaped by how people feel, how they work together, and whether they believe in what they are doing. Leaders must remain visible, encouraging and reflective. Challenges must be named, not hidden. Quick wins should be celebrated; early setbacks acknowledged.

Feedback loops are vital; staff, pupils and parents must be invited to share what is working and what is not. Adjustments should be expected, not feared. We must accept that change is not a one-shot effort, it is a learning process.

Throughout the School House changes, we worked hard to keep everyone involved. Tutors were supported in adjusting to their new central role. Feedback loops were established with pupils, staff, and parents. Staff were encouraged to share what was working - and what was not. Early wins, such as stronger relationships and more consistent routines, were celebrated. Setbacks, such as occasional confusion over new systems, including wrinkles with Wednesday lunchtimes, were acknowledged and addressed openly.

5. REFLECTING AND REVIEWING

The final stage, sustain, is often the most overlooked. Many school initiatives begin with energy and good intention but fewer make it through to becoming embedded, consistent, and enduring.

Why? Because sustaining change is hard; it requires ongoing attention, even as the usual day-to-day demands on time continue. It takes humility to listen, (especially when what we hear is that something is not working!) and it takes the commitment to stay the course, trusting in the process and remembering that these changes were made for the right reasons.

This phase also involves revisiting data, listening again to those affected, and adapting where necessary. One particular challenge lies in accepting that not everything will work brilliantly from the outset; we must allow time to see whether a change settles into place or whether, in fact, we have made a mistake. If it is the latter, we respond not with panic, but with care, adjusting thoughtfully and deliberately, rather than reacting hastily.

Throughout our reviews, we have learned that sustaining change often comes down to habits. Do staff have regular opportunities to reflect on their practice? Are systems in place to keep the new approach visible? Are we still asking, “Is this helping our pupils?”

And we are brave enough to stop doing what no longer works. The discipline of de-implementation - letting go of legacy practices - is as important as implementation itself. It respects time, preserves energy, and sharpens focus.

This phase is very much still underway in School House. Among the many positives, one change that has not worked as well as intended has been the new activity structure. Designed around the Duke of Edinburgh model, which all pupils now undertake in Year 9, it aimed to develop habits of service, skills, and physical activity. However, in introducing this framework, we unintentionally removed too many of the more niche options that pupils had previously enjoyed, including valuable time for rehearsals and other specialised pursuits. When we spoke with pupils, this was the one area they clearly missed. In response, we have found a way to bring back these opportunities next year, while still retaining the core aims of the DoFE-inspired structure.

Alongside this adjustment, the next phase of change is taking shape. From September 2025, we will introduce:

- A new house system for Years 7 and 8, to strengthen identity and peer mentoring.
- Revised reporting focused on learning behaviours to support academic coaching.
- An updated Friday enrichment model, balancing academic depth with creativity and choice.
- A new layer of Faculty Coordinators to oversee both curriculum and enrichment.

And beyond that, Phase 3 is already in planning for 2026. The review of School House is not “one and done.” It is iterative, inclusive, and grounded in the lived experience of our pupils and staff.

WHY THIS MATTERS

As parents, you may wonder why any of this matters? Surely what matters most is what happens in the classroom, on the sports field, or in the music recital?

And of course, it is, but those things are shaped by something deeper: by the structures and values that sit behind them. When a school takes the time to review what it does, to listen to its community, to draw on evidence, and to implement with care, everything improves. Not overnight, but sustainably.

Children notice more than we think; they feel the difference when staff are confident and connected. They thrive in schools where change is purposeful, not chaotic; where reflection is embedded, not sporadic; where improvement is continuous, not reactive.

Even excellent schools are not perfect. But they are relentlessly curious. I feel that excellent schools should always be asking: “Is this good enough for our pupils?”, and when the answer is “not yet,” they should act.

A FINAL THOUGHT

In an age of novelty, it is tempting for schools to chase every new idea. But true improvement is not about doing more things, rather it is about doing the right things well.

Review. Reflect. Implement. Sustain. These are not just steps in a guidebook. They are a mindset, and like all mindsets, they are best learned through deliberate practice.

When we do this well, change becomes culture. This is vital as, in the words of Peter Drucker; “*culture eats strategy for breakfast*”.



THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF SCHOOL CHAPEL WORSHIP IN A SECULAR AGE

by *Tim Hunt*

In an era often described as post-Christian, where over half of the UK population now professes no religious affiliation, the role of worship within schools might seem increasingly tenuous. The 2021 census confirms a dramatic shift: just under half of the population in England and Wales now identify as Christian, with growing numbers citing no religion at all. This transformation has prompted many institutions, especially schools with historic religious traditions, to confront a pressing question: does regular chapel worship still matter?

The answer, as this essay will argue, is a resounding “Yes”. Far from being an antiquated practice, chapel remains deeply relevant. In a culture characterised by secular materialism, fragmented identity, and growing mental health concerns among young people, the experience of chapel offers space for reflection, community, finding meaning, and engagement with a moral and spiritual vocabulary that secular frameworks struggle to provide.

A SECULAR CONTEXT, A SPIRITUAL NEED

We begin by acknowledging the reality of the age. Despite a significant portion of the population still nominally identifying with Christianity, church attendance increasingly wanes. Many people now identify as agnostic, atheist, or simply “none” on religious surveys. British society has become not only multi-faith but also deeply secularised, with materialism - both philosophical and economic - dominant in public and private life. For many, the human being is viewed purely in physical terms, as the sum total of biology, neurons, and chemistry, with no transcendent purpose or spiritual dimension.

Yet this materialist worldview is far from sufficient. The epidemic of mental health challenges among young people suggests a deeper crisis; an existential uncertainty about identity, purpose, and belonging. Chapel worship may not provide instant solutions, but it addresses these deeper needs in a way that mere academic or physical education cannot.

In this light to repurpose school chapels as gyms, spas, or concert venues, tempting though this may be in terms of space usage, would be to lose something irreplaceable. We can joke about Gothic swimming pools and chapel vestries turned into physio suites, but there is a much more serious underlying point: education must attend to more than the physical. A genuinely rounded education, as Ofsted recognises, includes the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development of the individual.

CHAPEL AS A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER

Chapel is not merely a place of worship; it is a place of encounter. Here, young people encounter stillness in an overstimulated world, meaning in a world of distraction, and transcendence in a world that too often reduces everything to the measurable. Chapel services provide a language and framework for grappling with life’s biggest questions: What does it mean to be human? What is our purpose? How do we respond to suffering? What does justice look like?

These questions cannot be answered by science alone. Science means “knowledge” but it does not, nor ever can, answer the ultimate question “Why?” Chapel offers not a rival to science, but a complement: a space where the “why” is taken seriously, where students are invited to reflect, to contemplate, and, if they choose, to pray.

Moreover, chapel brings students into contact with traditions that shape not just the school, but British culture more broadly. Christianity, whether one believes in its theological claims or not, has profoundly influenced the UK’s institutions, laws, literature, art, and moral frameworks. Regular chapel worship keeps students connected to this heritage. To understand our national identity without reference to Christianity is to risk a form of cultural amnesia.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND MORAL VOCABULARY

One of the most valuable aspects of chapel worship is the moral and spiritual vocabulary it imparts. Words such as grace, forgiveness, repentance, peace, and hope are not just religious jargon; they are essential tools for navigating the complexities of human life. In moments of crisis, such as bereavement, illness, or war, people often reach instinctively for these words. Secular language often lacks the depth and emotional resonance to do justice to such experiences.

Take, for example, a national event such as the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Many attendees at her memorial service at St Paul's Cathedral were unable to join in with the hymns; a small but telling sign of cultural disconnection. Yet they still came, still felt drawn to mark the moment in a sacred space. Their presence suggests a lingering yearning for rituals and traditions that offer structure and meaning.

Regular chapel services, particularly in schools, prepare students for such moments. Even if they do not subscribe fully to Christian doctrine, they learn to recognise and understand its language, rhythms, and values. This cultural fluency is not indoctrination; it is formation.

CHAPEL AS COMMUNITY AND CONTINUITY

Chapel also fosters a sense of community and continuity. In schools with strong chapel traditions, pupils know they are part of something larger than themselves - something that stretches back in time and will continue beyond them. As Stuart Alred also noted in his essay last week, and which I re-iterate here, the memorials in the chapel - plaques, windows, crosses - connect the present generation with those who came before. In the words A.L. Francis' School Commemoration hymn, "We kneel where our forefathers knelt... Their blessings hover o'er us."

In a fragmented and transient culture, such continuity is precious. It anchors identity and instils humility. Students are reminded that their story is not the only story; that they are part of a larger narrative that includes sacrifice, service, and faith. This historical consciousness, rooted in a spiritual tradition, cultivates gratitude, responsibility, and perspective.

Chapel services can also unite diverse student bodies. In an increasingly pluralistic society, shared spiritual practices may seem exclusive, but when handled with sensitivity and openness, they can foster common reflection rather than division. A Christian service, framed with honesty and humility, can provide a space for all pupils, religious or not, to consider ethical questions, contemplate life's mysteries, and encounter beauty through music, silence, and liturgy.

RECLAIMING THE SPIRITUAL IN A SECULAR AGE

The secular world is not devoid of spirituality; it is simply seeking it in new places. Shamanism is reportedly the fastest-growing "spiritual" practice in the UK today. People "hug" trees, meditate, chant mantras, seek transcendence through art or nature. Spiritual hunger has not gone away; it has only changed its shape.

This should not surprise us. As G.K. Chesterton (allegedly) remarked, "When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing anything." Disenchantment with traditional religion has not eliminated belief; it has diversified it. But such alternative spiritualities often lack depth, coherence, or communal grounding. They are highly individualistic, consumerist even, and seldom form part of a wider ethical tradition or supportive community.

By contrast, chapel worship is embedded in a coherent theological and ethical framework. It affirms not just the existence of a spiritual dimension, but the reality of a loving, purposeful God who calls people into relationship and moral responsibility. This is not vague spirituality, but rooted, accountable, demanding belief. It is also generous belief, for at its best, chapel worship does not coerce, but invites; it does not demand uniformity, but offers unity.

THE CHAPLAIN AS WITNESS

Finally, the presence of a chaplain bears witness to something profound: that this life is not all there is, and that each person's life has value beyond what they produce or achieve. The chaplain's role is not just to teach about God but to embody belief in a sceptical environment. Their presence alone is testimony to faith. Indeed, the chaplain might be heard to say, "I would not be here in this place if God had not called me."

Young people, often more sensitive than we imagine, detect authenticity. They may not be "taught" into belief, but they may be "caught"; drawn by the integrity, compassion, and curiosity of someone who believes. That is why school chaplaincy matters. The chapel is not merely a building; it is a space where faith is lived, explored, and sometimes quietly discovered.

CONCLUSION: A SPACE WORTH KEEPING

In an increasingly secular society, regular chapel worship may seem anachronistic. But the very challenges of our age - moral confusion, mental health struggles, spiritual searching - make it more necessary than ever. Chapel worship invites reflection, fosters community, connects us to our heritage, and provides a moral and spiritual vocabulary for life's most difficult questions.

It does not offer easy answers. But it keeps open the possibility that there are answers, that life has meaning, that suffering is not the end, and that we are more than the sum of our parts.

To remove chapel from school life would be to deny students access to one of the richest and most enduring traditions of human wisdom. To retain it is to affirm that education is not just about exams and the physical nature of lives, but about souls.





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