



STEM lesson at Parsons Green Prep

A Broader CURRICULUM

As increasing numbers of parents despair at the emphasis on exit exams, Anya Waddington looks at what prep schools are doing to ensure pupils get a fully rounded education in subjects *no one* is setting exams for.

In the 1980s film *Educating Rita*, Frank the alcoholic, world-weary professor turns to Rita and says melancholically, "To pass examinations, you're going to have to suppress, perhaps even abandon, your uniqueness." It's a conundrum that many parents recognise – in a system increasingly dominated by examinations – how do we preserve our children's uniqueness and, importantly, encourage them to develop into fully-rounded, independently thinking characters, rather than little exam-bots? Most of us believe wholeheartedly in the theory of 'education for education's sake' until the bruising reality of school entrance systems crushes this optimism under the rock of examined subjects. After all, there are only so many hours in the day – something has to give. But the demands of modern life require that the adults of tomorrow are equipped with strong critical thinking, innovative ways of problem-solving and a broad set of analytical skills to forge ahead in the modern environment. How are prep schools rising to this challenge? I spoke to a handful of schools whose core curriculums look beyond examined subjects.

For some, Philosophy might seem too ambitious a challenge for young children to grasp. A view refuted by Brodie Bibby, Head of North Bridge House Prep. His introduction of Philosophy throughout

the prep school supports one of the school's aims: to instil respect for one another. Philosophy gives children the ability to talk, debate, discuss, give their opinions and "to tolerate and respect different views". Kicking off the initiative with Year 3 and *The Giving Tree*, Bibby has discussed: 'Who do we love and why? In each instance, the teacher has to learn to be the facilitator and to manage the discussion

carefully, as it can move quickly to quite emotive subjects. The benefits have been clear to Bibby, and not just in the knock-on effect on pupil improvement in other subjects. It's hugely confidence-building; children who wouldn't naturally join in are now chattering away, and it's also great for listening skills. The children are encouraged to think in a different way and to see other sides of the argument. North Bridge

House don't officially train children for interviews (which can make them sound robotic) but Philosophy is "very powerful for interview technique," says Bibby. I am struck by the benefits for teachers as well as pupils; not only does it allow teachers to improve their question technique, it also shifts the emphasis from teacher-centric lessons, to ones where the teachers take a more facilitating role.

The Pilgrims' School timetables General Studies, in which the Headmaster, Tom Burden, teaches Years 6 and 8. "[Lessons] cover a

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raft of things: Philosophy, Politics, Ethics... we do anything around which conflicting views can form." It seems he enjoys taking the opposing view to the boys, whatever that may be. On the day I speak to him (following a warning that he's going to swear in class) he's thrown out the question: "Why is swearing unacceptable?" to the delight of Year 8. The subsequent discussion branches out in all directions: *Gone With the Wind*, taboos, censorship... And here lies the purpose of these lessons: boys are encouraged to think about things in a different way – to figure out that the world is more complicated and multi-layered than good versus bad, or black versus white. If the mainstream curriculum lessons are the block-work, then these lessons are "the cement around the bricks".

The importance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects is now reflected in the curriculum of all secondary schools. However, Parsons Green Prep is ahead of the curve and has made great strides to ensure STEM is embedded in the primary curriculum. The school has a designated STEM coordinator and has won an Independent Schools Association Award (ISA) for STEM provision. As well as an imaginative, cross-curricular approach, all pupils have a weekly STEM lesson, looking at real-life problems pulling the four subjects together. They might tackle engineering; for example, designing marble runs – one group figuring out how to make the fastest one, another the slowest – or building bridges, experimenting with different styles, spans and working out which can take more weight. Headmaster Tim Cannell stresses that they are, "Preparing them for life not just for their next school. The skills they learn are transferable. STEM lessons aren't knowledge-based but inquiry-based." Children are naturally inquisitive about the world so of course the lessons are popular, but they also benefit hugely from working together and learning that things can go wrong and that they'll bounce back. Why did my bridge break? Why did my marble stop? The resilience lessons they learn feed into other subjects.

Cottesmore has taught some form of Coding since the 1980s but in the last three years it's been added to the curriculum as a lesson for Years 4 to 8 (complemented by a club and other activities). "If you want to engage with the modern world it is important that you



Coding at Cottesmore



Philosophy at North Bridge House Prep

understand Coding," believes the Headmaster, Tom Rogerson. And the significance of it being timetabled rather than an optional club is that it is important that every child is able to engage and understand it. From circuit boards to boards of another kind. Cottesmore also teaches chess as a timetabled lesson in Years 4 and 5. Taught by a national player, the benefits are numerous: it's sociable, good for working memory, processing speed, strategy, patience and, of course, works well in an era when mindfulness has become increasingly important.

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Educationalists have long agreed that learning languages early in life increases cognitive and academic abilities. As well as the obvious communication skills they teach, languages offer added benefits such as cultural awareness and sensitivity. With this in mind, French and Latin are both mainstays of the Common Entrance curriculum and Spanish is also fairly common. A few, recognising the economic rise of China, have Mandarin taster sessions after exams, or offer a club. At Handcross Park they have gone one step further and teach Mandarin to all pupils from Reception. Natasha Witham, Head of Modern Languages, believes that our geographical proximity to Europe means that European languages are a necessity but "as global citizens, of the high-tech world we live in, the ability to master a world language such as Mandarin, in addition to Spanish, should set our pupils apart from many of their peers."

At St James' Schools in West London they believe that education should offer pupils a curriculum that nourishes the whole being: spiritually, educationally, intellectually and physically. One of the founding principles of the schools was that the teaching of all language was to be based on Sanskrit, which lies at the root of many eastern and western languages. The Junior School teaches Sanskrit from Reception; each year the St James Junior School Sanskrit Speech Competition is held, during which each class recites by heart passages from spiritual Sanskrit classics, followed by an English translation.

In the film, Rita confounds her professor Frank, passing her exams with distinction. The irony of course is that it is he who has had the education. His parting words as he heads off to Australia are, "Everything out there is just beginning." For our children the same feels true. When everything is just beginning, it is important to allow them to explore and interrogate the world around them, rather than constantly shoe-horn them into the linear, exam-orientated system.