

An All Hallows School pupil exercises their creative muscles

CARING FOR CREATIVITY

TRADITIONAL wisdom might place the “three Rs” at the centre of any child’s schooling, but does a focus on facts and figures have to come at the cost of creativity?

The short answer, according to our panel, is a resounding “no”. While preparing pupils for passing exams remains an enduring aspect of the educational landscape, nurturing their imaginations also forms a significant part of the picture.

This is particularly true for Dr Trevor Richards, Head of Shepton Mallet’s All Hallows School, which endorses former government creative and cultural education advisory committee leader Sir Ken Robinson’s opinion that “if you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original”.

Dr Richards explained: “Our children need to be allowed to explore their creative sides to enable them to go beyond straightforward regurgitation of rote learning and let them develop the confidence to produce their own ideas and solutions by thinking critically and using an

innovative approach.

“The element of risk-taking which comes with originality not only helps our young people learn as they make mistakes along the way but, by teaching them to embrace those mistakes, it can foster resilience and a mentally healthy mindset.”

Placing creativity at the heart of education can be tough when future careers seem more likely to require STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] expertise, but Yarrells School Head Sally Weber-Spokes believes that not doing so is a dangerous path to follow.

“It is absolutely the case that the digital world is moving fast and, as educators, we need to help prepare young people for the pace of this change and the world they will inhabit as young adults,” she told us.

“The temptation for schools, however, can be to narrow their curriculums in favour of STEM subjects in a belief that this will facilitate students’ preparation for the business world more effectively.

“The result, although unintended, is potentially devastating for creative arts subjects; curriculum

time is being reduced and investment cut.”

The value of creativity in preparing pupils for the workplaces of the future is equally not lost on St Mary’s Shaftesbury School Headmistress Maria Young.

Labelling it as a “vital” component of teaching, she added: “Most educators agree that the modern workplace needs problem-solving individuals who are able to think outside the box, to take risks and to be able to see the links between seemingly disparate processes.

“Creative activities enable this way of working and should take place in all classrooms, not just the traditional arts-focused subjects. Additionally, the creative arts have a considerable role to play in student wellbeing as a means of self-expression.”

Ensuring creativity is fostered rather than forgotten is also an important part of the education provided for youngsters at Salisbury’s Chafyn Grove School.

Describing the trait as one of education’s “cardinal virtues”, Headmaster Simon Head said: “Twinned with curiosity, it fuels

exploration and discovery – the grail of learning.

“Freedom and encouragement are essential features of a creative environment and every possible care must be taken that targets do not inhibit this most natural and powerful of instincts.”

Education expert William Wilcox, who helps families find the right school through his Which Boarding School business, is another advocate of viewing creativity and STEM subjects as complementary rather than contradictory forces.

Explaining that he often encounters parents who want their child’s education to provide academic rigour in an environment that nurtures independent, original thought, William said: “Thinking outside the proverbial box and an ability to tackle problems with practical and innovative solutions will both be highly-valued attributes in the next generation of jobs.

“Arguably there is now, more than ever, a need for creativity in the teaching of and approach to maths and all the STEM subjects. Educational success has become too focused on academic results at the »

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Dance performances, like this one at St Mary's Shaftesbury, allow pupils to express their creative sides



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– Simon Head, Chafyn Grove School –

expense of curriculum breadth.

“Independent schools, and in particular boarding ones, have always been the standard bearers for this approach because they have the time, the staff and the ethos to make this possible.”

SENSATIONAL STAFF

Acknowledging the importance of creativity is one thing, but implementing it – and ensuring it is not overused – requires the intervention of teachers.

William Wilcox explained that the person at the front of the class – as well as the ethos of the school they work in – play a “crucial” role in encouraging pupils to use their imaginations.

He said: “I have seen first-hand how an inspirational teacher can have a life-changing effect on the young people around them.

“However, these inspirational teachers must be working in an environment which values them, their subject and the work they do

in order to achieve the very best outcomes for the pupils.

“If teachers are to offer originality, they must be given the freedom to test new approaches. The children must also be given the space and support in which their creative efforts will be valued.”

Creativity at All Hallows School is embedded in pupils’ daily lives, with opportunities for exploration built into the curriculum.

Explaining his motivation for the approach, Dr Richards described young people as “natural risk takers, problem solvers and uninhibited visionaries” – traits he fears can be suppressed by the education system.

He added: “It is our responsibility and privilege as teachers to work in partnership with parents to encourage their imagination and self-expression and make our schools a cauldron of creativity.

“Parents and teachers can fall into the trap of thinking creativity is linked solely to artistic skills, but it’s

not. Creativity is about being able to look at a problem, research ideas and develop solutions.

“Daily life is full of opportunities to problem-solve, but too often we might opt for the quick and easy solution instead to save time.”

It is an understanding of the opportunities for applying creativity – and the subsequent benefits it can bring – that are the mark of a good teacher, according to Chafyn Grove School’s Simon Head.

He explained: “Outcomes are less important than how they are achieved; having the confidence to wonder and wander will take you anywhere. A good teacher will channel the energies and talents of children without hampering them, by being imaginative, sensible and curious themselves.”

Providing a broad education to expand, stimulate, challenge and enrich young minds is a “fundamental belief” of Yarrells School’s Sally Weber-Spokes, who actively resists any move to narrow

the curriculum in favour of the most recent initiative or directive.

She explained: “Education should provide pupils with valuable and regular opportunities to take risks, develop grit and determination, perform in front of their peers, express their creativity, their emotions, expand their understanding of symbolism, the human form and societal behaviour, as well as give them the opportunity to develop their knowledge in the core areas of the curriculum.”

The encouragement of creativity may be regarded as a positive, but Maria Young highlighted the need for moderation from teachers in today’s fast-paced society.

The St Mary’s Headmistress said: “Part of a teacher’s role is in regulating creativity.

Technological progress means that most young people are exposed to new and creative ideas at a relentless pace.

“Teachers are in the fortunate position of being able to balance overtly creative activities with deep, integrated learning, enabling students to discover where their own skill-set is best employed.”

CREATIVE CURRICULUM

Given the pressure on schools to deliver excellent exam results, it is to their credit that so much emphasis is placed on creativity in their day-to-day operation.

At Yarrells School, an interdisciplinary approach ensures that imaginative learning and the creative arts are able to co-exist happily with STEM subjects.

Sally Weber-Spokes said: “In order to prepare young people for their futures, we must teach them to think across subjects, be innovative and apply their knowledge to diverse scenarios.

“No longer can we sustain the single-subject, knowledge-based approach to learning when we know, as adults, that in order to succeed we have to draw upon all our skills in numerous ways to solve problems and find solutions.”

Concrete examples of creativity >>



Chafyn Grove pupils expand their minds at the "finding out" table

are not hard to find at All Hallows School, where pupils can access facilities including a design studio, workshop, two art studios, photography department, ceramic studio and display areas featuring inspirational work.

Art and design projects such as "All The Fun" – which saw every pupil having a piece of work displayed at a local gallery – further embed creativity within the school's fabric.

And while such opportunities provide plenty of scope for personal development, Dr Richards explained that they could also open doors for pupils in later life.

He said: "In the world beyond schools, there is an escalating emphasis on innovation, creativity, problem-solving, flexibility, values and collaborative skills beginning to permeate forward-thinking universities from employers who are including these elements in their selection processes.

"It is not about demoting the importance of academic disciplines. If we are to give our children the best chance of flourishing in the world they will inhabit, we must work to develop healthy mindsets, creativity, communications skills, and the willingness to take risks and to think innovatively."

Chafyn Grove's Simon Head is an advocate of promoting creativity by being creative in as many ways as possible. Extra-curricular activities, for example, are not relegated

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to the end of the day but instead integrated into the timetable.

Simon said: "Creativity is not restricted to art lessons – everything we do is infused with the recognition that this is one of the most precious qualities to nurture.

"If you can be creative in Latin and cricket, you'll find yourself swimming in imaginative waters all the time. Where creativity is allowed to flourish, it enhances appetites and habits. For some it will emerge as a driving strength, for others a complementary one.

"Above all, it protects all children from submission to a culture of testing and those stresses and limitations. Creativity allows children to remain children for longer, becoming ever more confident in their individuality – and light years ahead of robots."

Sally Weber-Spokes concluded that pre-prep age children benefit from exposure to creativity thanks in part to their sponge-like minds and lack of self-consciousness.

And just like Dr Richards, she points to the future benefits of an early focus on creativity.

"There is no question that an inter-disciplinary approach, combining STEM subject work with opportunities to develop ability in the creative arts is the education of the future," said Sally. "Knowledge is a powerful tool, but without a broad and emotionally intelligent mind, it is limited in its scope and efficacy."

For parents keen to find a school capable of nurturing creativity, William Wilcox has some advice:

- Look at the school's curriculum and breadth of subjects taught;
- Ask how it caters for exceptional students whose horizons may stretch beyond what the school can offer;
- Look at the facilities beyond the classroom. Can they be accessed out-of-hours?
- Ask how teachers bring creativity into the classroom;
- Find out what ex-pupils have gone on to study and what industries they have entered;
- Ask if merits or house points are given for generating creative solutions as well as traditional academic success. ■

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