



Time to teach thinking

C J SIMISTER TELLS **SALLY GILLEN** HOW SCHOOLS CAN HELP STUDENTS BECOME SKILFUL, INDEPENDENT THINKERS

By the time she arrived at Cambridge University as an economics undergraduate back in 1987, C J Simister was, she says, very good at learning. But she did not know how to think.

“I found it a real challenge, being in an environment at university where people would ask you what you thought, and then expect you to challenge, question and argue,” she remembers. “At school, I had been a very focused student. I was good at concentrating and I worked hard, but I hadn’t needed to think in an original way, to form my own opinions, to take risks. As a result, I often felt like I was just memorising things – I didn’t develop a deep understanding of the subjects.”

Today, Simister, a former teacher who now works as an education consultant specialising in intellectual character and independent thinking, sees parallels between her own experience of school and what is happening within the education system. The Government obsession with testing, which opens up a trap for schools to teach to the test, is turning back the clock. “What is rated as quality teaching now seems much more like a sophisticated coaching process. We train children to answer particular types of questions in particular types of ways – and when so many teachers tell me that there’s simply no time for thinking, then it’s not surprising that young people are becoming increasingly passive as a result. We have turned them into automatons,”

argues Simister. “Learner autonomy is one of the biggest challenges that schools and universities now face.”

It is a sad development, she reflects. And one she saw taking increasing hold during the 19 years she was in teaching – the career she chose because “I wanted to make learning fun, rather than a bit of a drag, which I’m afraid it was for me”.

Simister was midway through her degree, and destined for a career in the City, when she decided she wanted to be a teacher instead. A varied career followed, working in both the state and independent sector, with children from three to 18. It was while she was a teacher at Northwood College, an independent school, that Simister embarked on a master’s degree. It was a career turning point.

Learner autonomy a challenge

Encouraged to reflect on her own educational experiences for the first time, Simister says she became interested in the issues that girls face, particularly high achievers.

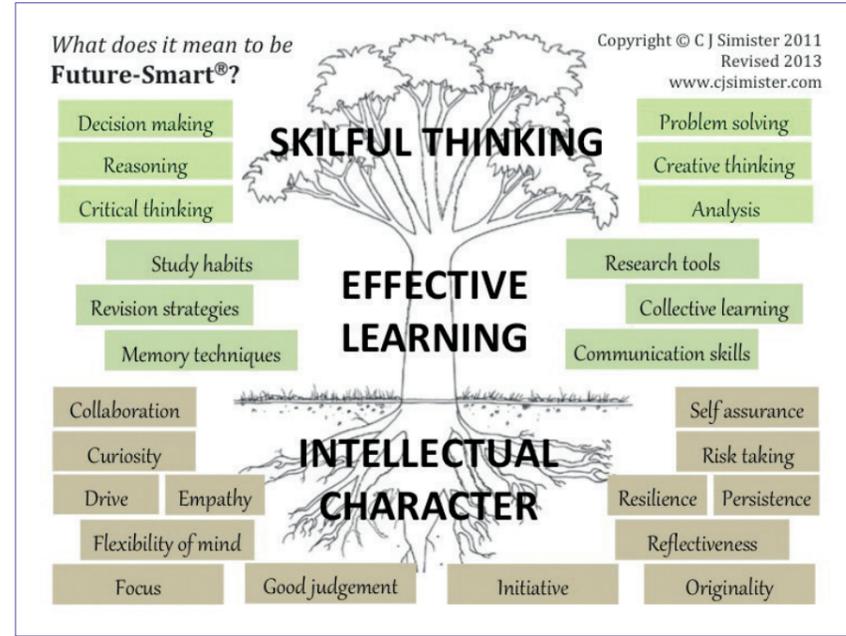
“Looking back, I started to think that perhaps quite a lot of girls put effort into their learning, really trying to do well. Their brains develop earlier than boys’, which means they tend to be more willing to follow the rules of the classroom, more able to concentrate and more eager to please from a young age. This work ethic goes down well with teachers, who give them lots of praise for being good and clever and thorough, and for doing the right thing,” she explains.

“It sets them on a course where they equate hard work and getting things right with success – not learning that other things, notably thinking independently, developing their own ideas and solving problems, are also important. It’s possible that girls don’t learn to wing it in the same way as boys, who are a little bit more chaotic at a younger age and haven’t quite developed that learning maturity.”

Her research led her to the work of American psychologist Carol Dweck and

LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

If you would like to hear more from C J Simister, book your ticket for this year’s leadership conference, which will be held on 24 November in London www.neu.org.uk/leadersconf



“STUDENTS WHO APPROACH THEIR LEARNING IN A MORE CURIOUS, REFLECTIVE, CRITICAL AND PERSISTENT WAY WILL DO BETTER ”

the concept of growth mindset, in which intelligence is viewed as something that grows and develops with each new experience, rather than as something fixed at birth.

“By allowing girls to fit so neatly with our school systems, I realised that we were in danger of developing only part of their potential intelligence,” she muses. “I felt there must be things we could do to correct this.

“My starting point was to look at whether there were certain patterns – things that high-achieving girls often had in common – which, while they might help them succeed at school, could prove to be stumbling blocks later on,” she recalls. “This led me to explore whether there might be simple ways to shift the style of our teaching to avoid these dangers – to make sure that we were developing the intellect, rather than just the memory.”

Flexibility of mind

From there, Simister set about putting together an early ‘cognitive development’ programme. “During my master’s degree, I began really small-scale with a lunchtime club in Year 5 and 6,” she explains, though she soon realised that for this to have impact an ‘add-on’ solution would be far less effective than something that could be integrated into the day-to-day way that subjects were

taught. “I shifted my focus and began to gather and invent teaching strategies that could help busy teachers deliver their subjects in a way that also pushed young people to ask questions, to think rigorously and creatively, to approach information in a more critical way,” she explains. Ruth Mercer, the forward-thinking headteacher at Northwood College, quickly recognised that this could have value right up to sixth-form and so a whole-school approach began to develop.

Even then she feels she made mistakes. “Looking back, I realise I got things back to front,” she says. “If you want to help young people become genuinely independent learners, giving them skills and tools only gets them so far. It’s still very possible that they won’t use those tools or apply those skills outside of your own lesson. So you need to go deeper – to target their underlying motivations, their inclinations to think and behave in certain ways.” This led her to investigate the work of people like Art Costa and Guy Claxton, who were more interested in disposition-driven approaches.

“When you supply children with a range of intellectual attributes that they might like to work on, it’s much more powerful. You give them the ability to reflect. Even very young children quickly pick up the concepts. When we were

talking about flexibility of mind, for instance, our youngest children would refer to this as having a bendy brain. For me, flexibility of mind is one of the most important intellectual attributes. Teaching young people that sometimes the more intelligent thing to do is to change your mind, to be responsive, to adapt to a new idea – even if it’s someone else’s idea – rather than stick to that first thing you thought because otherwise you will look less intelligent, that’s so important.”

Seven years ago, she left Northwood College and began working with schools not just across the country but internationally. Her Future-Smart® model takes the form of a tree, with the roots representing 14 intellectual dispositions (see box) that schools can foster. These feed into helping students become independent learners (the trunk of the tree) and skilful thinkers (the branches of the tree).

“Future-Smart® isn’t a one-size-fits-all model because schools are very different. It sets out the core ingredients in a visual and accessible way but then shares with teachers a multitude of approaches that they might like to draw from.”

It is for everyone

At a London girls’ prep school for four- to 11-year-olds (see page 18), which Simister has worked with on Future-Smart®, senior leaders have embedded intellectual character into the curriculum by introducing an approach called Learning Powers.

“Students who approach their learning in a more curious, reflective, critical and persistent way will do better. This is a very practical and manageable way of improving academic performance. It just requires a bit of a shift in perspective on the part of the teacher and the school.”

Simister’s hope is that the model may be introduced more widely. As someone who was state-educated, she would like to see more schools in the sector focusing on intellectual character. “A lot of this work is about equality and giving young people the best possible chance of learning about and developing these really important intellectual traits that are going to help them, not just at school, but also to access leading universities and then thrive in a very changeable workplace,” she says. “I believe passionately that this is for everyone.”