

Understanding 'soft skills' development at independent schools

An analysis of mental toughness at UK independent schools

January 2017

Quotes from participating schools

Dr Karen McNerney, Head of Merchant Taylors' Prep, a boys' day school in

Hertfordshire: "We place a huge emphasis on 'soft skills' at our school, not just as an addition to the academic curriculum, but an integral part of what we do. We want to give our pupils the tools to succeed in their learning and be active and independent in the process. We believe that development of these skills is vital to the future learning of our pupils, not just at school, but in their life beyond education. Evaluation of this work is essential, and the ISC soft skills and mental toughness project offered us a chance to quantify our work, which was why we were keen to take part. We are very pleased with the results and can see that our school overall has pupils with higher than average scores in confidence, control, challenge and commitment, and we see this as evidence that our work on soft skills is making a difference. Our next plan is to track some of the cohorts for a few years with the aim of targeting and measuring particular pupils and particular aspects of mental toughness. We are delighted to have found this way to evaluate our work and its impact on the pupils."

Jenny Dwyer, Headmistress of Sherborne Girls, a girls' day and boarding school in

Dorset: "At Sherborne Girls we were very pleased to take part in the recent ISC research into 'soft skills'. As a full boarding school we focus on educating our girls in our core values, encouraging them to be compassionate, curious, courageous and adaptable. The ideas within mental toughness resonated for us, and it was very useful to gain feedback, particularly for our Year 9 students. This has given us many new ideas about how we can help them to approach the demands of senior school and beyond."

Jesse Elzinga, Headmaster of Reading Blue Coat School, a boys' day school with co-

educational 6th form: "We pride ourselves on the quality of pastoral care we deliver with the aim to nurture and develop every pupil as a well-rounded individual. Alongside our commitment to academic excellence we endeavour to provide our pupils and parents with the full value of an independent education. Through participating in the soft value added research delivered by the ISC, we sought to gain an insight into the development of our pupils in the 4Cs to enhance their school experience. We have found the results from the study both positive and informative. It was encouraging to discover the emotional and social growth of our pupils during their school years here. The study has also enabled us to recognise the relevance of this data in day-to-day teaching and learning, and its value in improving pupil outcomes. The independent school sector is highly competitive and through our use of this data we can demonstrate to parents not only our ambition to develop a pupil academically, but also their character, resilience and 'soft skills', all of which broaden their education outside the classroom."

Chris Stevens, Headmaster of Bradfield College, a co-educational day and boarding

school in Berkshire: "Bradfield was delighted to take part in a survey which promised to identify

the impact of our all-round education on the crucial soft skills that pupils need to thrive in their personal and professional lives. It is exciting to see this evidence of soft value added alongside existing statistics demonstrating academic added value. As well as proving the success of the independent sector as a whole in helping develop soft skills, the research allows comparisons with national and international statistics, as well as participating independent schools, for benchmarking purposes. Bradfield is currently targeting the development of soft skills more explicitly both in and out of the classroom to offer the best possible preparation for a fast-changing world. Therefore, assessing pupils' confidence, control, challenge and commitment has been highly informative. The results of this research are very encouraging in terms of our current performance, but they also offer clear strands for the ongoing development of an 'education for life'."

Mark Mortimer, Headmaster of Warminster School, a day and boarding co-educational school in Wiltshire: "As a headmaster (and as a school), I strongly believe that what happens outside the classroom is as important as what happens inside. Of course, exam results matter, but not as much as the qualities that allow pupils to leave school able to thrive, both professionally and personally, in the fluid, ever-changing and let-go world of the 21st century. Emotional intelligence, reaction to failure, leadership, perseverance, resilience and the ability to improvise and adapt on one's feet are increasingly important. As a result, we took part in this study because, if we say these things, it's important to see if the evidence supports those views. I am, of course, delighted that the research does indeed show that an emphasis on 'soft skills' has tangible results, but it's not about gloating or trying to get one up on the state sector; it is about promoting what we, as a school and as a sector, believe to be the vital components of a fit and proper education system for the modern world. My hope is that ISC and the independent sector will use the results of this survey to continue to bang the drum in favour of an all-round education for all children.

Dr Felicia Kirk, Headmistress of St Mary's Calne, a girls' day and boarding school in Wiltshire: "St Mary's Calne has always prided itself on educating the whole person by providing an all-round education. It was extremely encouraging to see that the wide variety of opportunities provided to the girls resulted in scores showing them to be confident young women ready to commit to life's challenges. As part of our Connected Teaching and Learning programme, we have been promoting soft skills throughout all areas of school life with the result that it came as no surprise that the girls saw themselves in control of their own destinies. Our small class sizes and outstanding pastoral care mean that the girls are well known by staff and there were few scores not in line with our knowledge of individual girls. The additional responsibilities given to the Sixth Form will no doubt have augmented the natural resurgence of their confidence shown by all pupils taking part in the study. We continually review our curriculum both in and out of the classroom to make sure it is the best possible for our girls; the results of this survey and subsequent ones, will help shape future decisions."

Sue Hincks, Headmistress of Bolton School Girls' Division, a girls' day school, part of Bolton School: "At Bolton School, we aim to provide a well-rounded and comprehensive education for all our pupils so that we develop their confidence, creativity and mental courage alongside their academic achievements. We believe that it is strength of character which plays the key role in determining their ultimate success in life after school. We took part in this survey because we wanted to demonstrate how our positive and aspirational school ethos has such a

profound impact on the girls. We also place a huge value on kindness, loyalty and respect for others in the Girls' Division- but I've yet to find a survey that can 'prove' children (or adults) have such qualities!"

Sam Clark, teacher who led the research for the junior school research at The Abbey School, a girls' day school in Reading: "Understanding the way children respond to situations and their approach to learning is an invaluable tool to a class teacher. The concept of mental toughness forms part of our whole school discussion and understanding of educating the whole child. Identifying ways to improve mental toughness in a child means giving them the lifelong ability to cope with and thrive under the variety of pressures modern life presents. This research allows us to enhance the process of ensuring the children we teach are fully equipped to go out into the world with the confidence, resilience and determination to truly achieve their full potential."

Nicola Dick-Cleland and Jan Cresswell, heads of school at The Abbey School, a girls' day school in Reading: "We believe that embracing challenge is an essential part of personal development (not just related to academic learning and attainment), and see growth as a life-long process rather than a 'target' to be achieved. Our pupils' confidence is built in an environment where getting involved is second nature and where there is the breadth of opportunity to enable learning through discovery. Critically also, where the right kind of support is provided at the right time, we encourage the development of mental toughness to deal with setbacks and to learn from all experiences. Initiatives both inside and outside the classroom are designed to promote this ethos consistently and our participation in the mental toughness programme gave us another perspective on this aspect of our pupils' development. We will be working now to ensure that the confidence, resilience and persistence demonstrated by the younger children are enabled by adults (both teachers and parents) as children grow older and more aware of 'expectations' and of their peers. At The Abbey we have been explicitly focussing on the importance of balance, an initiative that has been driven from the top and reinforced both within and beyond the classroom. We aim to consciously counter the relentlessness of a 24/7 society and to ensure that all our pupils recognise that things of real value cannot always be measured. In this way we hope to engender the resilience, or mental toughness, that our pupils can rely on as they build their lives."

Greg Anker, Deputy Head of Berkhamsted Boys, part of Berkhamsted School, a diamond structure co-educational day and boarding school in Hertfordshire: "We grasped the opportunity to participate in the ISC's research into the 'soft skills' of confidence, control, challenge and commitment because it offered a means to quantify the intangible outcomes of a Berkhamsted education. The questionnaire measured the attitudes and dispositions that had been developed through our strong pastoral provision, based upon a house system, and our vibrant, extensive co-curricular programme. In June, we surveyed all of the pupils in Years 7 and 10 so that we could evaluate the extent to which these pupils have been able to develop better soft skills and mental toughness. We were delighted to discover that both year groups recorded strong scores within their cohort - both nationally and in respect of independent schools. The data generated by this research would seem to provide strong support for our view that the wider experiences our pupils enjoy would also seem to help them rise to the challenge of pursuing success in every area of life, both at school and thereafter."

Louise Robinson, Headmistress of Merchant Taylors' Girls' School, a girls' day school in Crosby, Liverpool: "Merchant Taylors' Girls' School has always carefully balanced the development of academic skills alongside 'soft skills' through an emphasis on personal enrichment. The extensive extra-curricular programme promotes the acquisition of knowledge and skills central to the development of the self. The ISC research study, with its focus on the development and identification of commitment, challenge, control and confidence, provided an opportunity to augment the school's enrichment data that monitors the participation rates and achievement for activities in and out of school. This school data has revealed aspects of commitment, challenge, control and confidence but the ISC study offered a more detailed analysis of individual skills, refining the pupils' overall mental toughness. The ability to communicate, think, reflect and take risks are essential to modern learning and employability along with the tools to 'know and moderate oneself' through adaptability, courage and compassion. The school aims to transpose the in-depth, bespoke outcomes of the study into the current system, resulting in data that is both pupil and teacher led, addressing developmental issues and their resolution. This will provide our pupils with the additional tools to build essential skills for the future that reflect the school's vision, 'An education for life'.