

The joyful years

Cathy Braithwaite, recently appointed as head of Gresham's prep school in Holt, explains her passion for prep education

I have the utmost respect for early years teachers who play such a vital role in nurturing the youngest pupils as they develop basic skills and behaviours, taking crucial steps in their formal learning. Equally, I have great admiration for colleagues who teach GCSE, IB and A Level courses, with the associated pressures of public examinations and league tables.

I believe that the years in between are formative and magical, making this the most joyful period in education. Prep and junior schools welcome children aged seven into Year 3, who are likely to have come from a pre-prep or infant school where the emphasis has been on play-led learning.

A key difference between prep schools and junior schools is the length of time children have during this next phase of their education – junior and primary schools send children on to secondary education at the end of Year 6 (aged 11), but most prep schools cater for children

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up to the age of 13. We believe that these additional two years offer a precious opportunity for 11, 12 and 13-year-olds to remain as children for a little longer – happy to play, away from many of the pressures associated with secondary education.

We are able to provide a broader and more flexible offering in a six-year time frame. We have chosen to build our own rigorous curricular and assessment programmes which focus on opportunities to equip pupils with the knowledge, skills and experiences required to



ABOVE: Cathy Braithwaite, head of Gresham's prep

become adaptable, competent and resourceful adults.

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In fact, a recent report highlighted that many young practitioners entering the surgical profession no longer have the required level of manual dexterity, because of a national decline in young people using their hands in activities which develop tactile general knowledge. Ideally, educators must inspire children to be inquisitive and to develop skills for the future, but we must also strive to preserve more traditional competencies too, for example with practical, hands-on skills.

Our pupils enjoy taking things apart to understand how they work; in design and technology lessons they tweak, tinker, or totally turn something on its head in order to fix or improve it, or to make a better alternative. Pupils learn a different foreign language in the first four years at

prep school before choosing two to study in depth during Years 7 and 8; our intention is to inspire confidence and adaptability in our young linguists in readiness for a global marketplace.

With 14 subjects on our core curriculum, we certainly promote breadth across pupils' learning, but it is important to empower children with a degree of control over their learning, interests and activities. Preparation for GCSE option decisions begins with simple choices of hobbies and I am really excited about plans we are exploring to create further opportunities for pupils to choose certain elements of their curriculum.

To let children really be children, while making sure they are being equipped for a future that becomes less and less predictable, a prep education offers a unique space for them to become problem solvers, out of the box thinkers, and global citizens of the future – whilst revelling in the joy of childhood.

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