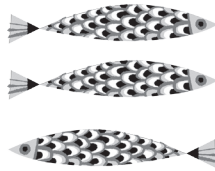


There is Another Way

The Second Big Book of
Independent Thinking



Ian Gilbert

with Mark Anderson, Lisa Jane Ashes, Phil Beadle, Jackie Beere,
David Cameron (The Real David Cameron), Paul Clarke, Tait Coles, Mark Creasy,
Mark Finnis, Dave Harris, Crista Hazell, Martin Illingworth, Nina Jackson,
Rachel Jones, Gill Kelly, Debra Kidd, Jonathan Lear, Trisha Lee, Roy Leighton,
Matthew McFall, Sarah Pavey, Simon Pridham, Jim Roberson, Hywel Roberts,
Martin Robinson, Bethan Stracy-Burbridge, Dave Whitaker and Phil Wood

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Contents

<i>There is Another Way</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	1
1. If You Want To Teach Children To Think: Politics, Hegemony and Holidays In the Dordogne	3
<i>Ian Gilbert</i>	
2. When Kids REVOLT: Creating the Right Conditions For Powerful Learning	11
<i>Mark Creasy</i>	
3. School Libraries and Librarians: Why They Are More Necessary Now Than Ever ..	17
<i>Sarah Pavey</i>	
4. The Learning Line: What Goes Up Will Go Down First	23
<i>Roy Leighton</i>	

5. Live Your Life: And 19 Other Things I Wish I'd Known When I Started Teaching .	29
<i>Rachel Jones</i>	
6. How To Paint a Better School: Why School Improvement Is Not a Numbers Game	33
<i>Dave Harris</i>	
7. Educational Research: The Eternal Search	39
<i>Dr Phil Wood</i>	
8. Because It's In the Exam: Why We Need To Teach Beyond the Test	43
<i>Lisa Jane Ashes</i>	
9. The Values Seesaw: Or How To Balance Your Own View of What's Right With the Demands of the System and the Pressures Placed On Us From 'Above'	49
<i>Dave Whitaker</i>	
10. Rules For Mavericks: When Teachers Are Caught Thinking For Themselves	55
<i>Phil Beadle</i>	
11. Knowing Your Students Beyond the Data: On Values, Valuing and Saying Hello ...	61
<i>Crista Hazell</i>	

12. Grow Your Own Cabinet of Curiosities: An Inventory of Exhibits To Get You Started On the Road To Wonder	65
<i>Dr Matthew McFall</i>	
13. Complex Doesn't Have To Be Complicated: How To Cope With Complexity Without Becoming a Simpleton	71
<i>Dr Debra Kidd</i>	
14. Planting Seeds of Aspiration In Schools: The Power Teachers Have To Change Lives	77
<i>Jim Roberson</i>	
15. There Isn't an App For That: Jazz, Flow and Thirsty Learners	83
<i>Mark Anderson</i>	
16. Athena Versus the Machine: Values Led Leadership In a Time of Change	89
<i>Martin Robinson</i>	
17. A Genuine Student Voice Is One That Is Heard: How Powerful Things Happen When Young People Speak Out	95
<i>Gill Kelly</i>	
18. I See No Ships: Visibility and Invisibility In Educational Research	101
<i>David Cameron</i>	

19. Tell It Through Story: A Giant Curriculum	105
<i>Trisha Lee</i>	
20. Tiny Worlds: Dung Beetles, Cosmic Drama and the Educational Imperative	111
<i>Professor Paul Clarke</i>	
21. There Isn't a Plaster For That! Emotional Health Is a Whole School Issue, So What Can You Do?	119
<i>Nina Jackson</i>	
22. From Attention To Obsession: The Stuff, Strategies and Soul of Teaching and Learning	125
<i>Hywel Roberts</i>	
23. Is the Education System In This Country F#%ked? Education, Inequality and Economic Fodder	131
<i>Tait Coles</i>	
24. If You Change the Way You Look At Things, the Things You Look At Will Change: Taking a Restorative Approach Across School Communities	139
<i>Mark Finnis</i>	

25. If Coaching Is the Answer – What Is the Question? How Professional Development Is All In the Mind	145
<i>Jackie Beere OBE</i>	
26. The Future Classroom Today: The Five Pillars of Digital Learning	153
<i>Simon Pridham</i>	
27. The Monkey’s Nuts: Creating a Challenging Curriculum	159
<i>Jonathan Lear</i>	
28. Now Can You See What I’m Thinking? Schools, Behaviour and Art Therapy	163
<i>Bethan Stracy-Burbridge</i>	
29. The Aesthetic Moment: When What We Learn and How We Feel Turn Out To Be the Same Thing	169
<i>Martin Illingworth</i>	



There is Another Way

1. Insist that your children look 'beneath the surface' and are given the space, encouragement and skills to think for themselves.
2. Take a fresh look at how you organise your curriculum and trust children to respond well when you really stretch them with genuinely authentic learning.
3. See your library as so much more than a room full of books and engage your librarian as an 'information professional' right at the heart of what schools are about.
4. Understand – and help your children understand – that learning is never a straight line and that getting it wrong is an integral step along the way to getting it right.
5. Remember to value children more than data, that children value people more than worksheets, that the best teachers are learners too and that your job is a part of your life, not the other way round.
6. Remember that your school – and its community – are unique. Simply repeating a formula used elsewhere denies all involved the chance to create something special.
7. Engage in educational research to best understand the power of educational research. But know its limitations too.

There is Another Way

8. Look for links between subject areas that will bring the curriculum to life and make it a purposeful experience for all learners and not just 'because it's in the exam'.
9. Look beyond their behaviour to the circumstances behind their behaviour and ensure you don't simply rely on simplistic 'sanction and reward' approaches.
10. Challenge everything – superiors, job titles, systems, everything that you feel is getting in the way of all children achieving what they are truly capable of.
11. Value every child in your class relentlessly and regardlessly in both word and deed and remember the extent to which little things can make a lasting difference.
12. Understand the power of wonder to help engage young people and motivate them to learn, then build in opportunities to discover wondrous things across the school.
13. Keep a watchful eye out for the unintended consequences of school improvement measures and always remember that schools are endlessly complex systems.
14. Look beyond what that young person is now to what they could become, with your help, and remember that your influence will reach further than you will ever know.
15. Use technology in learning to enhance great pedagogy not replace it. The skill, for you and them, is to start where you are comfortable, then reach just beyond that.
16. Think carefully about the nature of 'progress' in your school and be aware of what you are losing as well as what you are gaining. Especially when it comes to values.
17. Encourage young people to stand for something, to connect with their community and then to act on what needs changing. And support them all the way.

There is Another Way

18. Never confuse research with politics and always entertain new ideas without losing sight of your values, your experience and your common sense – then act accordingly.
19. Use story to tap into children’s imagination, to engage them, to help them remember what you’ve taught and as a starting point for many aspects of the curriculum.
20. Grasp the fact that the world we are educating our children in and for is unsustainable. Take your class outside and reconnect education with something bigger.
21. Mental illness is abundantly evident in – and often provoked by – life in school. Learn about it, know what to do about it and then do what is needed, every time.
22. Plan lessons for your children, in your classroom, in your school, in your community and that are ‘worth behaving for.’ Use their engagement to reflect on your efficacy.
23. Be aware whose interests are served by the curriculum you teach and the systems of control you employ. Knowledge may well be power but genuine education is about freedom.
24. Focus on relationships more than you focus on behaviour. Focus on values more than you focus on control. Look at your behaviour as much as you look at theirs.
25. Develop your practice in various ways and on an ongoing basis using the many tools available to you these days, with coaching right at the heart of the process.
26. Use technology to make your school credible and their learning relevant but integrate it with your development plan and the needs of the wider community.
27. Make things harder for children, not easier, by using curiosity and novelty as powerful tools to engage young people in their own learning.

There is Another Way

28. Seek to combine the curriculum with the reality of their own lives and then plan lessons where moments occur which you cannot plan for.
29. Understand how a young person's actions can be the outer representation of their feelings and the power you have, as a caring adult, to influence both for the better.

Tell us what you think – learn@independentthinking.co.uk

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Introduction

In 1993 Ian Gilbert set up Independent Thinking to ‘change young people’s lives by changing the way they think – and so to change the world.’

Since then, joined by some of the UK’s leading educational thinkers and innovative practitioners, Independent Thinking has worked in thousands of schools with hundreds of thousands of young people, teachers, leaders, parents and others across the UK and around the world.

Our message has always been one of hope, liberation and respect, putting children at the centre of the educational process with learning something they do, not that is done to them. And, more important than the outcome, it is the process that children go through – and grow through – that is the mark of a great education.

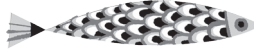
Over two decades, we have seen the educational pendulum swing back and forth but we, like so many great teachers, have striven to remain true to our principles. We exist to make a difference not to make a profit. We work like a family. We do what we can to help anyone who asks. We play nicely. We have a laugh while we’re doing it because, as we have said repeatedly, education is too important to be taken seriously.

In 2006, through our friends at Crown House Publishing, we published the first *Big Book of Independent Thinking*, our first foray into putting our voices in print. Since then we have written countless books and the Independent Thinking Press has won awards for pushing the boundaries of what educational publishing should look and feel like.

There is Another Way

In 2015 we published our second *Big Book*, at a time when the education we believe in and the education system we feel strongly about are under attack more than ever. There are strong voices across social media, in schools and in power telling teachers and school leaders that ‘this is the way to do it’, reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher’s famous TINA – There Is No Alternative – approach. Yet the way being advocated is a way that runs contrary to what many in the profession believe in.

This book is our message to them – and to teachers everywhere – that no matter what we are told, there is always another way.



Chapter 1

If You Want To Teach Children To Think

Politics, Hegemony and Holidays In the Dordogne

Ian Gilbert

When you want to teach children to think, you begin by treating them seriously when they are little, giving them responsibilities, talking to them candidly, providing privacy and solitude for them, and making them readers and thinkers of significant thoughts from the beginning. That's if you want to teach them to think.

Bertrand Russell

In 1951, the British philosopher, mathematician and, to be frank, bit of a ladies' man, Bertrand Russell, published an article in the *New York Times* entitled 'The Best Answer to Fanaticism – Liberalism'. For Russell, liberalism isn't about opposing authority but having the freedom to oppose it if you so desire. He doesn't claim that the freedoms to discuss and question will always lead to the best outcomes but that 'absence of discussion will usually lead to the prevalence of the worse opinion.'¹

Russell's education was as privileged as it was lonely, as is so often the case for our landed gentry. A series of tutors followed by the best that Cambridge University could offer helped develop the man who was undoubtedly one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century, one

who saw critical dissension as much as an exercise required for a good mind as for a functioning democracy.

If this is so, if we do want to teach children to think, and not just to combat fanaticism, to what extent is this actually happening in our classrooms? Are we genuinely fulfilling Russell's dream of treating young people in such a way that their thinking counts? The fact that they should be thinking counting more so? Or can a child perform admirably in a 'successful' school, winning a whole raft of GCSE grades and plaudits without ever having a thought of their own? Could it be argued that the current penchant for the teaching of knowledge in a direct transmission model, regimented by a highly structured system of sanction and control within an equally highly structured school system with its own command, control, measurement and punishment processes in place, is a direct attempt either to get children not to think at all or at least not to think for themselves?

And what about their teachers? Could it be argued that the current predilection for 'education research', the silver bullet to end all silver bullets, is an equally well-designed ploy to prevent educators from thinking for themselves too? Is the push to identify and promulgate 'What works?' a means by which 'What else might work?' can be conveniently overlooked, and the questions 'At what cost?' and 'Works to achieve what?' fail to get a look in?

Which, of course, brings us to the question of hegemony. I don't know about you but this is not a word that cropped up in my teacher training or my classroom teaching career. However, I was uneasy with a French GCSE curriculum that seemed to revolve around a white middle class camping trip to the Dordogne. I was also very concerned that although we didn't set by postcode, if we had it would have made no difference to which children ended up in which set. Looking back, these were all tell-tale signs of hegemony in action, and I was promoting it as blindly as the next person.

Put simply, a cultural hegemony is what you get when the powers that be arrange the world in such a way that it would appear that there is no other way for that world to be so arranged.² And then work hard to keep it that way. In education, this is achieved both through

what is taught and *how* it is taught. In the first instance, a national curriculum is a clearly labelled intellectual land grab that says, ‘This is what is important and you must know it’. The inference is, of course, if you know it but it is not in our curriculum, then it is not important.

The fact that in England, at the time of writing, there is a national curriculum, but it is only forced upon those schools which have not followed the yellow brick neo-liberal road to academy status, does not mean that the hegemonic grip is being loosened. Rather, ‘they’ are holding the dog they are wagging elsewhere – this time through interference in what exam boards put in their schemes of work. Wherever you hold the metaphorical dog – if you are the one deciding, for example, what and whose books are important, what and whose history is important and what constitutes ‘British values’ – then you control the hegemony and you are very much in the driving seat.³ No wonder the Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, rejected a call in 2015 for educators to have at least some say in setting the curriculum, claiming: ‘It’s my belief that what our children learn in schools must be something that is decided by democratically elected representatives.’⁴ We are the hegemon, we get to choose.

In the second instance, with regard to the way children are taught, turning children into uncritical consumers of knowledge (‘Because it’s in the exam’) can well be seen as a process by which we are turning them into uncritical consumers full stop. By definition, citizens do things for the common good and not just for financial or selfish reasons. They make choices, balance views, take responsibility, participate, activate, organise. They think for themselves. It is questionable that a ‘sit there and learn what I tell you or else’ approach to pedagogy will encourage this, regardless of how well it may prepare young people for passing exams – the only currency of educational success currently in use. Where education and business have become bedfellows, preparing a generation of uncritical consumers seems like a party donation well spent.

Of course, this is not the case in all schools. For the past five years I have spent much of my time as an educator and as a parent in the independent international school sector observing what is effectively the schooling of the children of the developing world’s elite. Encouraged by the highly skills-based International Baccalaureate programme, the majority of these schools

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