
Maximum flexibility

Francis Holland headmistress Lucy Elphinstone tells *Camilla Swift* about preparing girls for complicated careers – like her own

What are the most important lessons for modern-day schoolgirls? No, not the ‘three Rs’, or how to get four A*s at A-level, but flexibility and resilience. The 21st-century girl will have to be able to reinvent herself throughout her life her circumstances change, and she needs to learn the skills that will enable her to do just that.

This is the gospel according to Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of the London day school Francis Holland. The Chelsea girls’ school is already notorious for doing a good line in society ‘It-girls’, with an alumni list that reads like the society pages of *Tatler*. Names like Goldsmith, Ecclestone and Delevigne are all there, present and correct. But Elphinstone, who took up her role at the beginning of this school year, is determined to shake things up and bring new challenges to the table.

Academia is not the be-all and end-all of her aspirations. ‘Just getting good A-level results is not enough. It’s incredibly important, but those alone won’t equip girls for life in the next decade of the 21st century,’ she says.

In a world where girls, and of course women, are likely to have to earn their own living whether or not they decide to have children,

Elphinstone predicts that the next generation of girls won’t have conventional career paths. Instead they will have to adapt constantly to changes in their situations and family lives. ‘Asking girls who are making their GCSE choices, “What do you want to be?” is the wrong question,’ she says. ‘Women aren’t going to “be” something except for themselves; what girls need to think of is the skills they will learn from their education and ask: “What subjects will give me maximum flexibility?”’

The reason Elphinstone thinks this way might have something to do with the career path that led her to Francis Holland, a route she describes as ‘characterised by opportunism and barefaced cheek’. After working in publishing in London, and then as a ghost-writer in rural Scotland, she took up a role running a local Montessori school. From there — having taken her PGCE by long-distance learning — she went on to teach in prep and senior schools across the country ‘from the north-east of Scotland to the south-west of England’, before joining Downe House School in 2007 as Head of Sixth Form. And all of this while bringing up her own four children.

Elphinstone’s experiences have taught her to grab every opportunity with both hands, and it’s this

versatility that she thinks girls need to get the hang of. But how can a school teach its pupils to be flexible and make the most of their abilities?

The first step is for girls to accept that their professional lives might not be a chain of simple promotions, but rather a ‘series of uneven dips, troughs and even plateaux’. Then, says Elphinstone, it’s a case of making the most of those slumps by developing other skills. In a school, activities such as Young Enterprise and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Awards are particularly good for helping girls make the most of the talents and skills they already have. The very flexibility that women and girls often have naturally is ‘the ace in our hand’, she believes, but girls are famously bad at selling themselves. Boys, on the other hand, are ‘much better at blagging — and I think we need a bit of that’.

This is where the debate between single-sex and co-ed education comes into play. Having seen both sides of the coin (she taught solely in co-ed schools before moving to Downe House), Elphinstone is now ‘a total advocate of single-sex education’. Girls behave differently in mixed environments, a trait that isn’t always beneficial. ‘People say that girls are bitchy,’ she says, ‘but I think they’re only bitchy and cliquey when you introduce boys, as then the sisterhood will turn against each other.’ Academically as well, girls tend to thrive in an all-female environment, as they can ‘find it hard to assert themselves and achieve highly’ in co-ed schools.

When it comes to the age-old boarding versus day argument, she’s not quite so black and white about things. Boarding schools, she says, can be restrictive as the raft of activities available on tap stops pupils from learning independence, or how to juggle their own lives.

However, Elphinstone has to admit that there are some things that London day schools can’t do as well as rural boarding schools, and one of those is sport. She confesses to missing the ‘rolling lacrosse fields’ of Downe House, but is on a mission to improve all of the school’s extra-curricular activities, from sports to charity work. The Carmel Hall performing arts centre helps clinch the school’s reputation for producing prima ballerinas, with compulsory ballet for the younger girls, optional ballet for all others, and a ballet teacher who is the envy of London. And with Battersea Park on the doorstep, tennis is already big, and there are plans to introduce soccer as well.

Elphinstone’s aim, she explains, is to create a learning environment that cultivates ‘flexibility, enterprise and resilience’, which she sums up in one word: grit. The streets of Belgravia might not be gritty, but this headmistress certainly is.

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