

Sands School



The ALTERNATIVE FACE of
EDUCATION

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A Brief History of Sands School

by Sean Bellamy

In the summer of 1987 fourteen students and three teachers from the recently closed Dartington Hall School gathered in a garden and designed a new school. Prior to this, and subsequently (as far as I know), no school has been formed in such a way. Usually, well-meaning adults decide what a new school should look like and how it should function. Our initial level of student/teacher co-operation has remained at the heart of the Sands experience.

Dartington Hall School, in its heyday, was one of the country's most radical educational ventures and although we rejected some of the more 'public school' ethos, there was much we felt was valuable and remains in our approach today. Dartington Hall School existed for sixty years and educated some of the most interesting and talented people in the country. My very first impressions of the school were of students and teachers sitting together talking, of all ages sharing lunch, of sports sessions with 11-18 year olds playing together; in fact, of age and gender being irrelevant and of people listening to all ages with an openness I'd not experienced in other schools. It looked like my ideal of a university campus and I've since often viewed Sands as such an environment, but for younger students.

What we took with us to weave into the Sands experience has its origin in the fundamental differences I'd witnessed as a new teacher at Dartington Hall School: relationships between all ages based on trust and respect rather than some imposed artificial hierarchy; respect earned not expected; responsibility shared so that school is run by all of its members; space given for the development of the child as a social and creative being as well as an academic person; staff remaining open to creative criticism and judgement by their colleagues and pupils so that the education offered is relevant and successful. And perhaps fundamental to it all: an intuition that there is always more to learn, that we may not necessarily get it right, so there is no preaching or evangelism about the education we offer. Just an attempt to make it better and as such, each generation of students help the school evolve and remain alive.

More than thirty years on and the school is still recognisable as the Sands I first helped design. However, I believe it is better, more relevant today, and owned more co-operatively than in 1987, with a clearer structure and philosophy that we will try to share with you throughout this booklet.

Approach to Learning

All children are unique with their own interests and strengths and they are both social and academic beings. School should nurture the whole child, not just academic performance, and be flexible enough to adapt to the needs and interests of the individual.

Relationship is at the heart of our pedagogy - children who feel safe and heard become more capable learners. We hope that a Sands education is a meaningful experience that reflects real life, as such, learning at Sands arises out of concrete experiences, discussion, observation, choice, failure, inquisitiveness and play.



At the root of education at Sands there are some core principles, some of which lead to a different style and rhythm of learning than you might find in more conventional schools.

Some of the best learning happens outside the classroom

We believe that some of the best learning happens outside of the classroom and that it is essential that children have the freedom to respond to their own interests, curiosity and drives. This may manifest in them pursuing an interest or project instead of attending a timetabled lesson. Or they may feel their time is better spent organising a school event, talking with friends and staff or playing in the school garden.

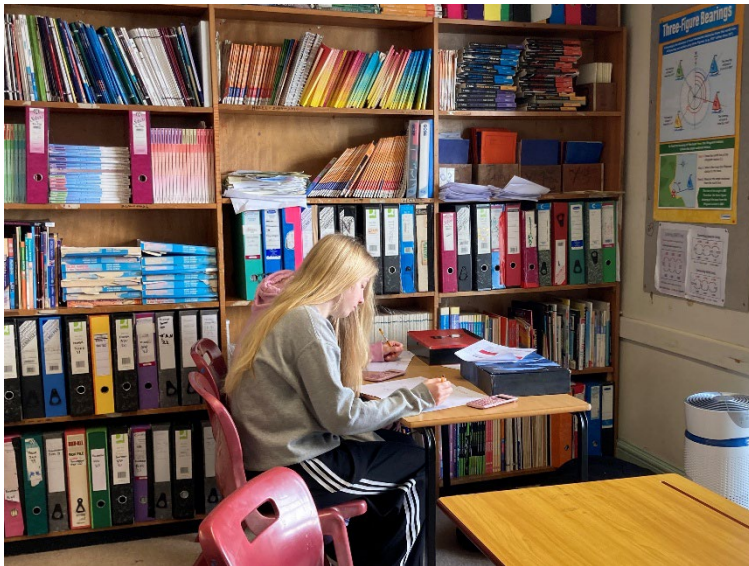
To facilitate this time and space for unstructured play is built into the school day, week and year. Students also have the freedom to self-direct their time, deciding which courses to commit to and how much time to spend on their own activities.



Each child experiences learning differently

Learning is a very different experience for each child – even within the same classroom. Our small class sizes and high staff to student ratio means we are able to respond to your child's individual learning style and needs. Every staff member will get to know your child well and appreciate their strengths and areas of challenge.

Our timetable is flexible and offers a huge amount of choice about what to study, how much time to spend in structured lessons versus self-directed learning and when to sit exams. This level of choice enables students to craft their own personalised journey through the school.



Children need supported challenge

When children are ready, they all benefit from being challenged and brought out of their 'comfort zones'. The informality of the atmosphere in school doesn't preclude pushing individuals or groups to face difficult tasks – and discovering that overcoming challenges is a really worthwhile thing.



Determination and motivation are necessary life skills if found at the right time and with sensitive support. There will be times when your children will need work hard to learn lines for plays or meet deadlines that might make them stress and worry. We don't want to protect children from these events. They will receive lots of support and encouragement to help them cross these hurdles and develop essential life skills.

Children need the freedom to make choices and learn from their decisions

Learning to use freedom wisely is the essence of the Sands experience. Your children won't always make the choices you would make for them, but learning to make good decisions it not something that we naturally do or suddenly discover at eighteen.

We believe that given the freedom to make mistakes, experiment with choice and learn about themselves in the process your child will become more and more skilled at making good decisions.



Curriculum Structure

Younger Years (11-14)

During the first three years, the curriculum is carefully structured to bridge the gap between the more closely structured primary education most students arrive from, and the greater independence expected of them at Key Stage 4.

Students are taught a broad spread of subjects and are introduced gradually to the idea of choosing and shaping their own timetable, with support from their tutor. Learning in the Y groups is playful, unconfined by the requirements of a pre-set course syllabus, lessons can be driven by the curiosity and interests of the group, fostering a love of learning and school, while also building core knowledge and skills in each subject. There is a strong emphasis on developing emotional and social skills and in fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility for the school community.

The day is anchored by morning and afternoon year group meetings and the timetable follows a predictable structure with core academics in the morning, followed by a more active lesson before lunch and project based learning in the afternoon.

Example of a Y1 timetable

	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri
9.45	Year Group	Year Group	Year Group	Year Group	Year Group
10.00	English	French	French	English	ICT
11.00	Break	Break	Break	Break	Break
11.15	Maths	Maths	Tutor Group	Maths	Maths
11.45	Study Skills	PSHE	Sport	PSHE	Social Skills
12.15	Drama	Music		Outdoor Learning	Community Project
1.15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
2.15	Science	Art	Humanities	School Meeting	FREE
3.00	Break	Break	Break		
3.15	Science	Art	Humanities	Useful Work	
4.00	Year Group	Year Group	Year Group		
4.15	Useful Work	Useful Work	Useful Work		Useful Work

Older Years (14-17)

Extended GCSE Programme

Our Key Stage 4 programme runs over three years rather than the conventional two with students typically moving onto further education at 17.

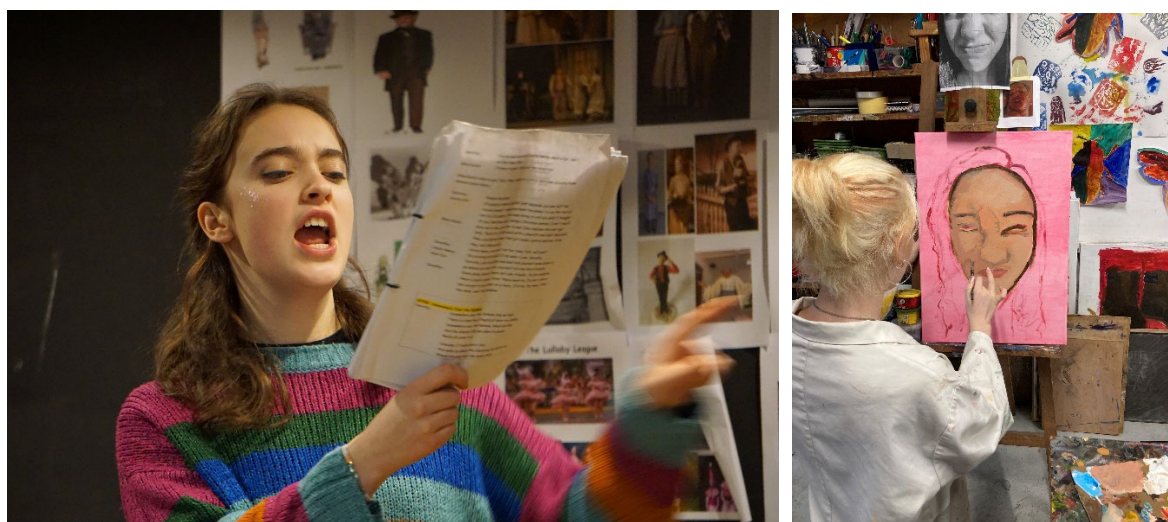
This extended programme has many benefits, it:

- enables a much greater degree of choice and flexibility
- spreads the exam pressure, enabling students to get better results and reduce stress
- creates a better balance between schoolwork, social life and other interests
- allows more time for children to mature, meaning they are more independent and better prepared for further education when they move on

Choosing what to study

Most students sit between six and ten GCSEs or equivalent qualifications, the right number and combination is a personalised decision, that reflects their interests, aptitudes and ambitions for further study, rather than a fixed school-wide expectation.

Options are offered in a range of three, two and one year courses, giving students a wide range of possibilities of what to study and when to sit their exams. The school's timetable is built around the choices students make, rather than the other way around with very few restrictions placed on options, all of which results in a highly personalised programme of study for each student.



Courses currently on offer

- English Language and Literature
- Mathematics and Further Mathematics
- Biology, Chemistry and Physics
- French and Spanish
- History, Geography, Religious Studies, Psychology and Sociology
- Higher Project Qualification
- RSL Music

- BTEC Performing Arts
- Art and Design
- ICT and Film Studies

Becoming independent learners

Depending on their choices students will have more or less free periods within the school day. They are expected to take much greater responsibility for their learning than in the younger years, deciding for themselves how best to utilise their time. All areas of the school are open for students to use at any time, providing they are not disturbing others, and there are a range of quiet spaces for independent study. This provides a school experience much more akin to the learning style common in further and higher education, satisfying the desire for greater autonomy that arises at this stage of development and helping to develop the skills that students will need in their further education and working life, with the support systems offered by a small school.



Life Curriculum

Not every part of the curriculum leads to an external qualification, and we do not think it should. Two subjects are taught to all students throughout their time at Sands without formal examination.

Physical Education gives every student regular access to sport, fitness and outdoor activity, recognising the contribution of physical wellbeing to learning and to school life more broadly.

Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) is taught through General Studies lessons, and covers the statutory content expected of all schools, including relationships and sex education as well as other broader life topics and skills.

The Role of the Personal Tutor

The personal tutor is chosen by your child within the first few weeks at the school and they play a central role in your child's education. The tutor helps your child design their timetable, helps them set aims and objectives for the next few months, and then monitors their progress in discussion with

other teachers. If your child needs support in a particular subject the tutor co-ordinates with the relevant teacher.

Useful Work

The day always ends with fifteen minutes of 'useful work' where the whole school participates in tidying and cleaning up. This fosters ownership and care for the school. Students help monitor the success of the cleaning rotas and ensure everyone contributes to the school.

Extra-Curricular Activities

Alongside the timetabled curriculum of lessons students have the opportunity to take part in a wide range of additional activities.

Childhood should be full of rich memorable experiences which bring learning to life. Through the year there are cultural trips to theatres, galleries and historical sites, opportunities to experience nature first hand through visits to working farms and conservation projects and adventurous activities such as climbing, caving and coasteering. But perhaps most importantly, we recognise when opportunities to play are more important than being in the classroom - so when it snows, we head up to Dartmoor with our sledges and when the sun comes out, we go swimming in the Dart.



The annual summer camp is an especially important part of the school calendar which builds independence, fosters cross age friendships and creates opportunity for adventure. A relaxed affair we travel to one of the many beautiful locations within a couple of hours drive of the school for five days of cooking, telling stories, playing games, building sandcastles and looking after each other.

The Democratic Structure of the School

The School Meeting

We believe that learning to think for ourselves, and communicate our thoughts lucidly are essential life skills that have been profoundly undervalued in state schools. Didactic learning leaves little space for real thinking. At Sands we have the luxury to give time to debate, listening and thinking skills. One of the places this happens is in our whole School Meetings.



Agenda items come from students and staff, and the meeting is usually chaired by students. The youngest to the oldest are encouraged to share their opinions on issues such as school rules, staff appointments and problems to solve.

Tutor groups

We also have smaller tutor group meetings where the key points of the School Meetings are reiterated and more intimate discussions can happen. A particularly complex or challenging School Meeting decision is often supported by discussions in Tutor groups.

The School Council

The Council comprises six students elected termly and supported by the Safeguarding Team. It's role is to investigate problems that occur in the school and try to resolve them by discussion. Any member of the school can take an issue to Council where they feel a rule has been broken or someone has behaved unreasonably. We try to arrive at outcomes by reaching a consensus through mediation, though the council can refer an issue to the School Meeting if a decision can't be reached.

Dealing with behaviour problems in this way fosters a better understanding of how one person's behaviour impacts others and a greater sense of the responsibility we all have to each other.

Headteacher and Leadership Team

Running a school is complex business and the Headteacher, supported by the leadership and administration team, ensures the school runs smoothly, safely and stays up to date with current guidance and regulations. Being a democracy however, means when changes need to be made the school community should be involved in the decision making process. Leading though collaboration may take longer, but it means decisions are embraced by rather than imposed on the community.

Frequently Asked Questions

Are lessons compulsory?

One of the fundamental questions we ask students interested in joining Sands is, whether they want to learn and take some responsibility for their own education. We only offer places to children who want to learn. So, although it is not compulsory to study everything on the timetable it is expected that all children will make a positive choice about their curriculum and attend all the classes they have arranged to join.

The younger students are encouraged to study the broadest possible range of subjects. We respect that some, even very young children, know what they want to study and equally know what they don't want to study. However, our role as adults is to help the child discern between subjects they are frightened of, have had bad experiences in previously or are struggling with versus those they reject for positive reasons.

A class full of students who actively want to study and have made the conscious effort to attend is a fantastic and rewarding learning experience: a class dominated by unwilling students is both unrewarding and creates the sort of negative relationships that plague other schools. Our aspiration as educators is to make learning sufficiently rewarding that the whole school want to fill their days with positive choices and a rewarding and challenging timetable of classes.

What about life after Sands?

We support students to make good choices about which courses to study at GCSE level in order to meet the requirements of their likely next steps. Our students choose to go onto the full range of further education opportunities with A levels being the most popular choice, followed by full time vocational courses in subjects like Art and Design, Music or Catering. But many others choose the more demanding International Baccalaureate or go straight into work via an apprenticeship. Colleges often comment on how confident and keen the students from Sands are.



Does the school have a homework policy?

We never set homework just to keep children busy but we do give children work to do at home if we feel it would benefit them. Teaching small groups, it is possible to cover huge amounts of ground and hence homework is often not necessary. As students' progress through the school more homework is set because the amount of curriculum to cover at GCSE requires more than just class time. Teachers always explain why homework is being given but it does become a more important element in a student's life once they embark on exam study.

Do you cater for children with additional needs?

Many of the aspects that make Sands unique can also be really beneficial for students that are neurodiverse or that have additional needs. For example, much smaller classes, not having to wear uncomfortable uniforms, being able to self-regulate and generally children having much more control over their day and their learning than in conventional schools. We also have a dedicated team of Teaching Assistants who give extra support to students when needed.

However, we are not a special school and the resources we have available to support additional needs are limited. It is also important to understand that the degree of freedom given to students at Sands demands a high level of independence and responsibility which can place a different demand on some children that might not be right for them.

We will only offer places where we feel we can meet a student's academic, emotional and social needs alongside the needs of the rest of the group. Evaluating whether we are the right school for your child is a gradual process of getting to know them, assessing the information you give us in the application process and observing them during the Try-Out Week. If your child has additional needs it's important to talk to us about their needs early on so we can help identify if Sands is likely to be a good fit or not.

What's your mobile phone policy?

There are many benefits from mobile phones and the internet such as being able to keep in contact with family and friends, use as an organisational tool, as an aid for learning and for entertainment. However, there are also serious risks presented by young people having a mobile phone or going online and when present in school mobile phones can be a distraction from learning.

We aim for Sands School to be a calm, safe and supportive learning environment. Creating a phone-free environment is the best way for the school to:

- reduce the risks posed to our students,
- significantly reduce students' exposure to unwanted content and harmful contact,
- support students to develop a healthy relationship with technology and,
- prevent phones from being a distraction from learning.

Students are **not permitted to use or carry mobile phones** or similar devices during the school day. This includes time during, before and after lessons, breaktimes, lunchtimes and while downtime. It does not apply while students are travelling to and from school including on school buses.

Where students come into school carrying a mobile phone or similar device, they **must be switched off and stored securely upon arrival** at school and collected at the end of the day.

Students may request permission to bring certain personal devices to use to aid their learning under the school's **Bring Your Own Device Policy**.