

Look outwards, not inwards

Today's young people want to help others and make a difference, says **Robert Milne**, headmaster of Emanuel School in south west London

Founded in 1594, with donations awarded for 24 children (equal numbers of boys and girls), Emanuel School originated through the kindness and generosity of a single benefactor. This sense of altruism and charity remains at the heart of many independent schools today, fostering valuable outward-looking partnerships between independent and state schools across the country, as well as the myriad charitable causes championed by young people through acts of kindness and personal endeavour.

Today's school generation, in my experience, has a genuine and often urgent desire to help others. When I first came to Emanuel in 2017, I remember speaking to several sixth formers in their café. Having just returned from a summer school trip, they explained how much they had learned from their experiences with our partner school in India. Beyond the sense of independence and travelling, they described their sense of being valued and needed, and making a difference to those they taught and befriended.

These pupils saw that helping themselves and helping others were intertwined. This point is one of the most important, to my mind, for ensuring that young people develop and grow up to live meaningful and positive lives. If we provide opportunities for them to look outwards and a little less inwards, their sense of self-esteem, happiness and confidence will grow. My colleagues and I remain committed to developing an inner resilience in young people, but we also believe that resilience does not come through creating an adamant emotional casing around young people; making them tough and hardened against a world that seeks to bombard and harm them. Isn't it better to immerse them in the world, let them experience it and show them how they can make it better for us all? The realisation that they can change and improve someone else's life is surely one of the most powerful forms of personal resilience building.

Whether we believe in the sensibilities or existence of the "snowflake generation" or recognise the reported falling levels of empathy in young people, one mantra might serve us all well: "Look outwards, not

inwards." It is an optimistic directive because everyone can do it – and it is even better for them and others if they act upon what they see when they "look out".

The need to look outwards appears to be growing. Dr Sara Konrath from Michigan University has undertaken research spanning more than 30 years. Her work shows that between 1979 and 2011 levels of empathy in university students fell considerably, with the steepest decline in the most recent ten years. It is telling to reflect that this period aligned with the rise of social media and greater individualised forms of interaction with the self, or possibly, the self and others in the e-world.

Interestingly for all schools, reading fiction may well boost our ability to emotionally connect with others. Recent studies by Toronto University have shown increases in a child's levels of empathy aligned with the

reading of fiction. At Emanuel, the school's thriving library sits in the heart of the main building. Book clubs remain popular and authors are regularly welcomed. With the rise of "bring your own" devices, allowing greater technological access to the curriculum, it appears that schools are right to maintain their libraries. They should be seen as places of calm and peaceful interaction during the social hubbub of a school day, as well as guardians of "empathy-cultivating fiction".

Returning to my pupil-led conversation in the sixth form café, the sixth formers told me they would like to do more for and with people living in the local areas of Wandsworth and Battersea. This idea has grown and the Primary Ambitions programme will launch later this year. Emanuel is partnering with up to 20 local primary schools, each with high numbers of children who are eligible for free school meals and pupil premium funding.



Emanuel School headmaster Robert Milne talks to pupils about the books they're reading

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Every student in our lower sixth form will leave the classroom on a Friday afternoon and spend time with pupils from a range of primary schools – mentoring, coaching, supporting and guiding them in music, sport, drama and artistic initiatives. Our hope is that the programme will benefit the primary school pupils, but, as it is a true partnership, we expect our pupils to gain just as much, if not more, from it. The initiative, borne out of our long-standing partnership with Christ



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Robert Milne believes young people are happier and more fulfilled if they look outwards

Church C of E Primary School in Battersea will, we hope, do far more than any lesson or lecture for the personal development of our school's young people.

Learning itself, aligned with current approaches to mental health and wellbeing, can encourage us to believe that the balance of our focus may be on ourselves. At Emanuel we believe that seeking to achieve your best so that you can better help others is the key to fostering good outcomes and long-term

pupil wellbeing. This belief is at the heart of our most-recent charitable initiative – one that directly links personal achievement with giving. Each year, we support three or four local charities, always based on pupil choices. When a boy or girl gains a commendation for an action, attainment or effort, they are given a token. The commendation is theirs and goes towards their personal success in the year, but the token is donated towards whichever of the four charities the pupil most wishes to

support. The token cabinet resides under the school's coat of arms – our founder's family shield from 1594 – with the motto *pour bien désirer* (the noble aim) inscribed beneath.

We want each of our pupils to thrive and do well at school, but more importantly we want them to feel part of something bigger than themselves – to feel happier and more fulfilled by looking outwards, caring for others and improving the world around them.