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In 1893, a visionary man named John Haden Badley recognised that the authoritarian regimes of Victorian public schools were not giving children the best start to life, and so he founded Bedales as a humane alternative. The school has since grown from strength-to-strength, and remains a beacon for innovative education.

Badley believed that children should be encouraged to be curious and spontaneous through concrete learning. As pupils grow and progress through their schooling, he proposed they should be allowed to flourish independently and guided by expert practitioners, through constructive intervention where learning can develop.

Engaging with the senses

Bedales Pre-Prep School, Dunannie, puts an emphasis on learning through doing and making. We believe that minds are inspired more by experiences rather than just being told about things. Students should also engage the senses – the “head, hand and heart” that forms our motto.

A standard lesson might involve children wandering through the Bedales estate, looking at vegetation, the farm, animals, seeing changes in the environment with their own eyes, and taking their own cameras and documenting what they see. Pupils are also encouraged to engage with the local community, as well as broader national and international matters. At harvest time, they support food banks and deliver packages of treats to local care homes, and recently the school financed the purchase of a cow for an African family. As they progress through the school, children’s involvement can



continue and grow stronger, as shown in the case of the annual school trip organised by Sixth Formers, who support a community in Swaziland and help them become self-sufficient.

Independent thinking

Accordingly, we encourage younger children in Pre-Prep to take responsibility in small ways – putting on their own Wellingtons and outside clothes, looking after book bags or organising fundraising events. And this continues at Bedales Prep School, Dunhurst. We want our children to begin the process of acquiring independence of mind, not least because this is a key part of their more senior education.



A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

Children learn best when given the freedom to experience, do and make things for themselves, says Jo Webbern

Above, pupils at Bedales Pre-Prep, Dunannie, visit the animals on the school’s farm

We provide every opportunity for children to succeed on their own terms, fostering individuality, and encouraging initiative and creativity, and this sees us stray very consciously beyond the borders of the conventional curriculum. Children at Dunannie can learn Mandarin, access science labs to carry out experiments, and participate in art and design projects and World Book Day activities.

It goes without saying that the learning, development and progression of students is at the heart of everything we do, and academic expectations at Bedales Prep and Senior Schools are challenging. However, the curriculum also demands that pupils engage with it creatively and with maturity.

It would be restrictive of us to simply teach young people the nuts and bolts of passing examinations. Rather, we remain conscious that we are nurturing children, and everything we do is informed by this perspective. I believe that this is what sets us apart, and I like to think that John Haden Badley would approve. 🍷

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