

Raising the motivation and self-esteem of all learners by creating a climate for all talents to flourish: Developing empowerment for life

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Carefully watch your thoughts, for they become your words. Manage and watch your words, for they will become your actions. Consider and judge your actions, for they have become your habits. Acknowledge and watch your habits, for they shall become your values. Understand and embrace your values, for they become your destiny.

Mahatma Gandhi

Abstract

The issues discussed in this article have arisen from 12 in-depth case studies of 'successful' schools in England, which were carried out during the academic year 2006/2007. However the practices that have emerged from these case studies are universally applicable when one analyses the factors that enabled learners to develop self-empowerment, sustained motivation, high self-esteem, and, vitally, the power to face life and career challenges. In terms of 'success', the case studies of the schools were analysed according to the values developed through the ethos of the schools, together with a range of strategies for personalising learning, and providing students with open opportunities for 'living' learning experiences. A random sample of students who were interviewed expressed their sense of empowerment which flourished when they could articulate what they already knew, could negotiate what they needed to learn, and could discuss how they would approach their learning. Essentially the role of the teacher changed: the role became not only that of a mentor with life experience, but also that of a co-learner extending personal knowledge and solving problems alongside the learner. The learners were engaged in real-life problem-solving that revolved around their personal and community problems and challenges, and their own life aspirations. In particular, the students were engaged at an early age with regard to career aspirations and possibilities. This article also considers the essential qualities of leadership and democratic participation that are vital in developing all 'living' learning; in making decisions; in ensuring flexibility

of organisation; and the key importance of monitoring student development to ensure continuity and progression.

Keywords: Motivation; self-esteem; empowerment; raising achievement; personalised learning

Background to the article

The background for this article comes from 12 in-depth case studies of schools in England that were carried out by a team of experienced, high-calibre researchers who reviewed school policy documents, and spent several days in each school interviewing teachers, pupils and parents, and observing lessons. All the researchers believe in the quality of rich case study research within the paradigm of living learning and theory. All researchers had agreed on a framework for observation and questioning, and schools were selected because they were all functioning within challenging circumstances of various kinds, yet the learners were achieving high levels of success in national terms. The main headings within the case study framework were:

- Whole School Ethos and Shared Responsibility
- Policy of Inclusion of Learners' Diverse Cultures
- Policy of Identification of Pupil Needs
- Organisational Policies
- Teaching and Learning Strategies
- Monitoring and Remediation of Underachievement
- Policies for Assessment for Learning
- Standards of Achievement and Attainment.

The summary of the main findings of the case studies is published as a national guidance document available to schools: *Raising the achievement of able, gifted and talented pupils within an inclusive school framework* (2007. Publications@NACE.co.uk).

Although the following article is a summary of the case studies of good practice in 12 schools in England, the findings can be generalised with regard to the essential factors that should underpin effective learning and teaching in *all* schools. Many schools in South Africa may not have the sophisticated technology and materials that most English schools have, but the key findings of the case studies indicate that the most outstanding factor that enables learners to learn effectively emanates from the rich mentoring relationships that the teachers develop with their classes. The quality of these supportive relationships is such that learners are encouraged to question and exchange ideas freely within the Vygotskyan paradigm of learner and teacher negotiating and constructing meaning and understanding. Fundamentally these enabling relationships depend on the personal qualities and dedication of the teacher rather than on the material conditions within the classroom.

Undoubtedly the quality of the senior leadership teams in each of the schools is facilitative, supportive and strongly evident on a practical daily basis. This visionary, charismatic and practical leadership binds the whole school together and encourages pupil, teacher and parent voice in all school discussions and decisions. The school ethos conveys the teachers' belief that all learners can achieve despite personal problems and debilitating home backgrounds, and the schools function effectively within a democratic framework.

England has significant problems with regard to disaffected learners who find little relevance in the curriculum that is nationally prescribed, and with factors within their own lives. Particularly in inner cities, but also throughout the country, the problems of disaffection are exacerbated by factors such as fragmentation of families, a sharp rise in alcohol and drug abuse amongst young teenagers; a rise in teenage pregnancies; a rise in knife-crime; a rise in general violence and verbal abuse on the part of the learners. Large numbers of classes throughout England are not easy for teachers to manage and control. Yet the case study schools demonstrate in very

practical terms how they engage learners, how they develop a climate of learner responsibility, and how they enable learners to achieve well.

Moreover, the case study schools develop an acceptance and celebration of diversity of culture, religion, and language, with one of the schools achieving highly although over 80 languages are spoken within the school.

The case studies of the 12 schools reveal the following empowering principles:

- The needs of the learners are placed at the centre of all teaching and learning interactions. The focus is on creating a climate in which learners' questions are encouraged and valued. The aim of the teachers is to ensure that learners understand what they are being taught, and that they can see the curriculum content as having relevance to their lives.
- Learners have a strong voice: not only can they negotiate relevant learning assignments, they also have shared ownership of decisions and events in their school. School councils are actively engaged in school matters: pupils are consulted and listened to, and parents are encouraged to liaise regularly with the school about their children's progress.
- Learners can express their thoughts to a personal mentor or tutor when they feel that their personal and learning needs are not being met. However, they are also expected to take full responsibility for completing assignments they have agreed to undertake. Learning goals are shared between teacher and learner with both parties accepting personal responsibility for fulfilling both rights and obligations.

The main message arising out of the case studies is that teachers, learners and parents are in partnership, all sharing their aspirations and goals. All schools place great emphasis on emotional and social education. Mentorship and career guidance are prominent. The processes of problem-solving and thinking skills are given priority over memorisation of content as an end in itself.

Introduction

Throughout the academic year September 2006 to July 2007, I was privileged to work with a highly experienced team of five researchers who carried out in-depth case studies of 12 schools in England, (six primary schools and six secondary schools). The purpose of the case studies was to analyse the strategies all the schools had used to significantly raise the motivation, self-esteem, independence and achievement of all their pupils, including those pupils who could be termed exceptionally able. The schools were mainly inner London urban city schools, with a significant number of them, *inter alia*, surmounting considerable challenges ranging from:

- diverse and often debilitating socio-economic disadvantage with high parent/carer unemployment, high government support to alleviate social deprivation, high numbers of fragmented families, and, consequently, high numbers of students eligible for free school meals;
- special educational needs such as speech and communication difficulties, particular and formally registered emotional, mental, social and physical needs were well above the average norm for England;
- multilingual, multiethnic, multireligious and immigrant school communities with as many as 70-80 languages spoken in the school community.

It needs to be emphasised here that the 12 schools were all in various combinations of challenging circumstances, yet the pupils were not only achieving well in terms of the basic government requirements, but pupils, parents and school governors expressed their support for the schools, their values and their commitment.

The researchers conducted interviews with members of the Senior Management Team in each school, and also with students, teachers, parents and school governors. The schools

provided access to information from the school websites, school policy documents, examples of curriculum planning and assessment, pupils' assignments, and statutory school inspections (OfSTED: The Office for School Standards in Education). In addition, lessons across the curriculum were observed.

Similar characteristics emerged from all the participating schools, confirming a very clear collection of interrelated qualities underlying school development and practice that have raised the motivation, self-esteem, independence and achievement of all pupils within the participating schools. Most importantly, in all schools the learner voice was strong as students expressed their feelings of personal involvement in the processes and aims of their learning. (See also Barrett, 1989; Katz & Chard, 1990; Chaplain, 2000.)

School ethos and philosophy

Leadership and shared responsibility

All the participating schools actively promote and celebrate equal opportunity, racial equality, multi-lingualism and social justice. The leadership of the Senior Management Team provides both extended vision and immediate hands-on school action and support that is real and practical, and the daily evidence is readily perceived and celebrated by teachers, pupils, parents, non-teaching staff and school governors. (See also Sammons, Hillman & Mortimer, 1985; Alexander, 2000.) However the leadership is not only 'from the top': the voice of the whole school community is heard; decisions and responsibilities are debated, owned and shared amongst the immediate school community and also beyond it. The school development policy is open to debate, amendment, and even reconstruction if necessary. The members of the immediate and wider school community understand and accept their roles; the lines of communication are open and accessible, and well supported with regular meetings and accountability. The school ethos powerfully embraces the concept of reflective practitioners, as practice is analysed and revised in the light of its efficacy as expressed by pupils, parents and governors. Teachers are viewed and respected as caring professionals and credited with the understanding of their grasp of teaching and learning. Continuing Professional Development is carefully targeted by the teachers themselves in order to bring about self-improvement. (See also Merry, 1998; Alexander, 2000; Williams, 2003.) Essentially the pupil voice is strong and has considerable influence on both school decisions and personal development. Pupils feel encouraged and confident that they can discuss any aspect of their schooling with both teachers and the Senior Management Team. They perceive that their teachers believe in their multiple potentials and have high expectations of them all and they respond to this positively. Parents, carers and other community members are welcomed into the school and feel that they are listened to and their ideas valued. The major thread running through the school ethos is that of whole community involvement, shared decision-making, easy access to school staff, and at least one welcoming person to greet visitors when they arrive at the school. (See also Williams, 2003; Sotto, 1994.)

Policy of inclusion and equal provision

An important element that emerges from all the case-study schools is that meeting the needs of more able pupils is perceived as the pivot of lesson planning, and not perceived as an add-on to 'normal' curriculum-directed school provision. Lesson planning *begins* with possible extension activities, with primary subject heads and secondary departmental heads, taking leadership roles and supporting all staff in their planning, ensuring that there is a rich supply of extension materials, in addition to what the pupils themselves might generate. The important message is that a school must create opportunities for all learners to discover their potential gifts and talents across the full range of human capacities: emotional, social, spiritual, visual/spatial,

mechanical/technical, auditory/musical, physical/movement, language (oral and written), mathematical, scientific. Good learning and teaching strategies for able pupils are accepted as good practice for all pupils and good practice develops from a commitment to student-centred learning based on an enquiry-based, problem-solving curriculum. Key skills of learning-to-learn are perceived as problem-solving and thinking skills, questioning skills, recording and research skills, and the important skills of self-assessment and self-monitoring. All topics studied are made relevant to life by systematically looking for the similarity of issues within the prescribed curriculum content and real life scenarios. Whenever possible, opportunities are seized with regard to problem-solving in everyday situations. In addition a high priority is placed on students managing their own and one another's behaviour; and on them becoming independent and self-disciplined learners within a framework of mutual respect and tolerance. The high level of pupil choice and decision-making means that pupils have ownership of their learning and this in turn leads to ready acceptance of responsibility and the growth of independence. (See also Meadows, 1993; Merry, 1998; Laevers, 2000; Alexander, 2000; Wallace, Maker *et al.*, 2004; Haydon 2006.)

Identification procedures of pupils' strengths

All students are regarded as having 'gifts' across a wide range of domains, albeit with varying degrees of potential, and the role of the teacher is to find the gift in every child. Explicit and openly acknowledged within the schools' value system, is the acceptance shown through daily practice that every pupil has a 'gift' which can be used in the joy of personal development and also for the benefit of the school and community. The teachers are encouraged to develop their own perceptive awareness of every student's learning profile, not only in the traditional academic subjects, but also across the creative arts and personal and social abilities. Importantly, the assessment of student development is kept flexible to accommodate pupils who may discover a latent gift or talent through experiencing new and enhanced opportunities. Another important element is the constant updating and sharing of information across all subjects with the emphasis on diagnostically assessing the whole profile of the learner across cognitive, affective and physical domains. All processes of identification are made transparent and understandable to learners, parents/carers and governors. Thus diversity and difference are celebrated, and it is acceptable that personal 'gifts' vary across the full range of human capacities (social, emotional, spiritual, mechanical/technical, auditory/ musical, physical/movement, visual/spatial, linguistic (oral and written), mathematical, scientific). (See also Riding, 2002; Wallace, Maker *et al.*, 2004; Wallace & Eriksson, 2006.)

The qualitative assessment of individual learning progress through classroom observation and dialogue with the pupils is given a major emphasis: This is linked closely with the ethos that good, caring teachers do understand their pupils, and confident learners are quite capable of assessing for themselves whether their learning experiences are appropriately satisfying and challenging. A necessary corollary here is that pupils are given plenty of opportunities to reflect on the quality of their learning experiences and to verbalise these assessments knowing that changes will occur. The pupil voice is strong and learners are involved in decision-making and consequently have ownership of their learning. A wide range of quantitative measures are also used across the case-study schools; but with the understanding that these measures are only snapshots of a pupil's development across a range of specific skills at a certain time.

The detailed identification and nomination procedures, both quantitative and qualitative, have a profound impact on teachers' thinking about students' learning needs in general. The process has encouraged teachers to think about individuals rather than groups, and to recognise that there are many potentially able pupils who come from disadvantaged home backgrounds. Teachers recognise that the level at which the student may begin school learning, is not an indicator of the progress the student may make with support and guidance. (See also: Sainsbury, 1998; Drummond, 2001.)

Continuity of progression: Transfer and transition

Strong emphasis is not only given to the collection, updating and communication of all students' profiles and progress, but to the continuity of this information passing on to subsequent phases of education (early years, primary, secondary and tertiary). Designated staff are appropriately trained and carry specific responsibilities for data acquisition, maintenance, security and information dissemination as and where appropriate. Extensive school IT facilities support this communication network, and all teachers are expected to consult and update the intranet information.

Pupil progress is closely monitored from the baseline point of entry through close communication with parents and carers. Primary schools run parent classes on how to prepare children for school, and parents are welcomed into the school community to participate in activities. Parents and carers are also encouraged to request special classes, such as how to help develop reading skills, mathematical understanding through play activities, the importance of healthy eating and exercise, etc. In some of the schools where parents and carers are reluctant to attend, a great deal of time and effort is put into forging links through personal contact, spending time talking to parents and carers who accompany the children to and from school. A significant number of parents train as classroom assistants on the understanding that they will not work directly with their own children: teachers report that parents develop great patience and understanding of other children's learning needs and transfer this understanding to their own children's needs.

There is excellent liaison between the schools at every stage of transition through detailed reports of pupils' achievements regarding both in-school and out-of-school activities, examples of pupils' work, and both quantitative and qualitative comments on pupils' strengths and on areas needing support. In all the case-study schools, specific time is made available for these reports to be read and discussed by all staff so that repetition of skills and mastery of knowledge is not repeated. The avoidance of unnecessary repetition of skills and knowledge already mastered constitutes a major challenge to all teachers, especially since large sections of the national curriculum framework are repeated in each phase. The intention of the national curriculum framework is that of a spiral curriculum, but too often, the body of content is 'delivered' – a topic being started from the 'beginning' rather than from a point that extends pupils' existing knowledge and skills. Transition booklets, work examples, induction days and computer data transfer are characteristic of all the case-study schools. (Wallace, Maker *et al.*, 2004.)

At the major transition point between primary and secondary education, the case-study schools are particularly well-organised. There are curriculum evenings to ensure that parents and carers are well-informed on how to prepare their children for secondary schools. Arrangements are made to ensure that pupils, parents and carers make visits to the schools once the children have been allocated a place, primary schools arrange to meet with the secondary school Special Needs Co-ordinator to provide detailed information about those pupils who may have special educational needs. Primary pupils compile their own portfolios of their 'best' work and also of the work that needs further support: they also complete forms detailing their special interests and achievements. Parents and carers also contribute to this sharing of advanced information for pupils in Year 6 (end of primary) and after arrival in Year 7 at secondary. Where the transition information available to the secondary school may be relatively limited due to a large number of feeder primary schools, the secondary school has developed detailed systems for collecting, collating and analysing data on student progress.

There are very active partnerships between primary and secondary schools, and also with local universities, that are on-going throughout the year. In all schools, there are 'buddy' partnerships between older and younger pupils; mentoring and interest partnerships developed between pupils, with members of the community and universities. Secondary students act as mentors and lead activities for primary pupils that range from jazz to origami, from modern dance to sports coaching. Some senior secondary students engage in work placements in their feeder primary schools. In addition, a wide range of appropriate workshops are shared between

secondary and primary schools, when the workshop content is appropriate, for example, discussions of identification and assessment procedures, record-keeping and monitoring, and procedures and processes of mentoring (Meadows, 1993; Merry, 1998; Laevers, 2000; Wallace, Maker *et al.*, 2004; Haydon 2006).

Achieving differentiation across the curriculum

A vital aspect in providing differentiated learning experiences is giving the students a voice in articulating what they already know, and in deciding what they need to learn, and how they will approach their learning; together with making decisions regarding the depth and breadth of study they would find challenging. As mentioned above, this constitutes the greatest challenge for teachers, and requires them not only to have extended knowledge of the pupils' background and current level of progress, but also the willingness to enter into a dialogue with *all* pupils in order to audit what is already known and to negotiate the next stages. However, especially for very able pupils, the role of the teacher must essentially change: the role becomes that of a mentor with life experience but not necessarily with expert knowledge within a subject or topic area; this necessitates the teacher becoming a co-learner extending knowledge and solving problems alongside the learner.

During the Foundation Stage nationally, differentiation is generally well-established since learning is perceived as a developmental process proceeding as a result of each child's base-line profile on entry to school. In all the case-study schools, in addition to this fundamentally child-centred approach, the major aim is to develop young pupils' independence, confidence, self-esteem, and a full range of skills that lay the base for further learning and development. However, in the later primary and secondary schools in the case-study, this same emphasis is carried through: the development of a differentiated curriculum based on individual needs and rates of progress, achieved through listening to pupil voice and negotiation of learning goals. This ethos is perceived as the key to developing a climate in which all pupils can flourish to independence.

Staff personalise the academic and practical tasks they set by negotiating with the pupils the key questions within a topic: the questions are generally open-ended, and with teachers varying the degree of support and help they provide, the expectations they have of students, the time they allow for work production, the degree to which they offer help, the kind of homework assigned and the use of critical feedback and praise.

The driving force throughout lessons lies in developing students' questioning, thinking, problem-solving and learning-to-learn skills: the acquisition of research, recording and communication competencies is highly valued as constituting a range of skills necessary for independent, self-directed learning. Pupils who are more able are encouraged to work in greater depth and breadth on questions of their own choosing in order to extend the basic work they have already covered. The content is viewed as the vehicle for thinking, and not as an end in itself: learning is based on constructing new knowledge rather than reproducing knowledge from memory. New skills, both generic and subject-based, are developed as the need arises, and the pupils are aware of why the skills are important and how they will be used in subject areas and across the curriculum. Pupils participate fully in class councils, year councils and school councils, and are encouraged to talk openly about their learning and sense of challenge and level of achievement.

The Senior Management Team, Heads of Year, and Heads of Departments support the development and monitoring of Schemes of Work. All planning is expected to include a wide range of possible activities with appropriately differentiated stimuli and extension materials, although pupils are expected to generate their own resource materials through their research. The Senior Management Team expects all staff to see this quality of preparation as the entitlement of all pupils within an ethos of equality of opportunity.

All the schools in the study have well-developed strategies for in-service staff development, reflection and review: and the updating of Schemes of Work and other school

programmes arise naturally from the pupil review sessions where not only are pupil needs identified, but also staff and school needs. At these meetings, agendas are raised and targets set and built into the school development plan. All lessons are backed up by an extensive range of learning opportunities at lunchtime, through after-hours and out-of-school clubs, specialist mentoring and master classes. Importantly, all enrichment and extension challenges are open to all pupils and viewed as another avenue for pupils to discover their interests and strengths and, importantly, for staff to observe them.

All schools use flexible systems of grouping pupils, using a range of acceleration, mixed ability, setting, extension and enrichment approaches: these flexible groupings lie comfortably within a school ethos where all pupils are valued and celebrated for a wide range of 'gifts' and 'talents'. Within the classrooms there is a systematic use of different approaches, notably the TASC Framework for Thinking and Problem-solving, and Philosophy for Children. The TASC Problem-solving Framework is used as a whole class initiative and provides learners with a structure that can guide them through a totally personal learning experience; Philosophy for Children also uses a whole class approach to questioning and decision-making (Wallace, 2001, 2003; Hymer, (in press) 2008).

Monitoring potential underachievement

A major pattern that emerges from all 12 case-studies is the regular review of all learners' progress. Since detailed and careful records are compiled from the beginning of a child's life in school and constantly updated and referred to the regularity of review brings all learners' needs into the forefront of teachers' awareness. Thus any signs of underachievement or lack of progress are identified before the situation escalates into a chronic (and often permanent) syndrome. Parents and carers are kept informed; but importantly, the learners are encouraged to express their views and feelings about the suitability of their learning programmes and whether their activities are engaging and satisfying.

Hence another major pattern that emerges is that pupils realise that they have a voice: pupils do know if their learning is worthwhile and they also know if their views are taken seriously. In all the participating schools, learning targets are negotiated and agreed between pupil and teacher, and counselling opportunities are available if these targets need for any reason to be re-negotiated. When this happens, a number of possible interventions are explored: a new approach to learning might be tried; a mentoring experience initiated; regular counselling sessions agreed; new targets worked out. When causes of underachievement lie outside the school, then parents and carers are brought in, or additional psychological advice is sought.

There is no doubt that students are active participants in all these interventions and they realise that they are accountable for their own decisions. They have ownership of their learning, and they readily accept the responsibility for carrying their decisions to fulfilment. Pupils engage in constructive educational dialogue about their motivation, anxieties, work-leisure balance, personal work portfolios, extracurricular activities, homework management, and possible career path. Consequently, pupil reviews lead to teachers reflecting on their practice and deciding whether they need professional help and advice in reviewing any aspect of their school development (Sammons, Hillman & Mortimer, 1985; Katz & Chard, 1990; Sotto, 1994; Alexander, 2000).

Assessment for learning

Strongly linked with monitoring pupil achievement, is the teachers' commitment to assessment for learning. Pupils' records of previous levels of achievement are known, so pupils are allowed to negotiate choices of the topics for study within an area of the curriculum, or outside the curriculum, if the learner has already covered the conventional parameters. There is flexibility and acceptance of pupils exploring areas that might be quite beyond the teacher's expertise. This requires great confidence on the part of the teacher – the real acceptance of the role of the

teacher as co-learner or sometimes junior learner. Pupils are taught the skills of how to organise their work and how to carry out aspects of self-assessment, and procedures for peer-assessment.

The intention is that assessment gives carefully orchestrated 'feedforward' in the form of further questions to be considered, or skills that need to be brought into play leading to progression. With potentially highly able pupils, these are higher order and deeply probing questions that need further thought and research. Essentially, a pupil has the chance to continue with a topic until s/he feels ready for the summative assessment of that particular assignment.

Conclusion

The 12 schools in the case-study were selected because they had a range of challenges in common with many other schools throughout England. The inspections of one particular primary and one secondary school stated that they were failing to challenge their most able pupils who were coasting and making little 'value-added' progress. Consequently, the schools took up that criticism and reviewed their whole teaching and learning practice. Other schools in the study have catchment areas that are amongst the most deprived and disadvantaged in England; yet others are dealing with communities that are extremely diverse ethnically, linguistically, and culturally.

Nevertheless, all the schools in the case-study have demonstrated that their pupils have achieved highly.

The strong messages that have pervaded all the case-study reports are:

- all the pupils are celebrated because of their diverse strengths and interests;
- the pupil voice is strong and valued as well as the voice of parents, carers and governors;
- leadership is visionary yet practical and decision-making and responsibilities are shared;
- the pupils have ownership of their learning which is personalised so that the learners can make choices;
- the school organisation is flexible and responsive, revising and adapting procedures and practice;
- record-keeping and monitoring of pupil progress is thorough and used productively.

In summary, the schools are places of living learning, human values have become their practice – and hence their destiny. One could argue that the case-study schools take an interactionist view of the education process. In all the schools, at all phases from Foundation to Upper Secondary, the students are able to make choices and use their own initiative; ideas are respected and questions are welcomed; the curriculum is negotiated as a series of problems to be investigated and potential solutions found; students are confident risk-takers. The opposite isolationist scenario is created when students are made to listen and follow set instructions; to work within rules and never be part of negotiating them; to experience education as a 'stand and deliver' curriculum – in the paradigm of Freire's banking concept of education.

When the purpose of education is perceived as a process for learning lifeskills, and when the world is perceived as having a series of problems to be resolved, then learners are engaged in living learning as an active participant and capable problem-solver. What greater gift can an educator bestow when s/he has equipped a learner with the confidence, skills and adaptability needed for further learning.

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