



Making school less 'schooly': what's the impact on student attitudes?

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Aims of the project

Over a period of several years, we set out to transform the ethos of our school. Our hypothesis was that this could raise pupils' aspirations and attainment. Adopting a range of strategies, we looked to change the attitudes of staff and pupils towards learning and the learning environment. Our sense was that there was no reason why "... schools have to feel 'schooly' – with no toilet paper and graffiti ...". We aimed to create a school where we knew students by name and where adults routinely had conversations with youngsters.

Dimensions of the study

Participant researchers included the headteacher. This was action research at the school level, rather than within the individual classroom. It took place in an upper secondary school in Suffolk, with specialist 'Sports College' status. There are 1400 students on roll. The local education authority operates a three tier 'middle school' system, with pupils joining the upper school at age 14, until 18. It can be difficult to attribute success in the school – particularly at age 16 – without regard to the contribution made in the middle school before transfer. There are 350 pupils per year group who are predominantly white British, and typically experience the advantages of 'middle class' homes.

Progress was assessed with reference to achievement data, and to 'student voice' questionnaires – regularly administered to track changes over time.

Summary of outcomes

Structural changes to the operation of the school – designed to reflect, communicate and shape the values of the institution – secured significant changes in pupil attitudes towards school and learning, and led to raised attainment levels. This had a pronounced effect on the relative attainment of groups of pupils,

who had typically under-performed. Recent results showed a rise from 62% A-C to 74% A-C at GCSE level.

Background and context

Prior to the interventions described in this report, as many as 60% of students had not had a conversation with an adult during the previous week. In particular we took the view that boys were influenced strongly by dominant stereotypes and the expectations around them; we wanted to bring benefits to them by providing contrasting role-models to those outside school, through how we talked with students, and by making changes to the environment.

We started this project from a relatively strong academic base, but we wanted to explore how higher attainment might be secured. Our established staff underwent a period of turn-over during the project, with 70% of posts changing hands in the six years. This brought additional contextual factors to bear – the loss of teaching experience, weighed against opportunities for new promotions and different perspectives. Recruitment proved to be especially difficult in Maths and Science, yet the ability to refresh the staff, and take on new people contributed to developing, affirming and securing the changes in school ethos. Overall, substantial changes were made over the six years of the development work, including: a modified timetable for the school day, alterations in the school's physical environment, newly-developed assessment and reporting structures, and the employment of new personnel.

Processes and strategies

At the outset, six years ago, the school was perceived to be a 'good school'; but what was striking was that teachers were standing up teaching a lot, with traditional didactic pedagogies. This was viewed as both a strength and a weakness. Teachers enjoyed their subject and their classes, but despite the quantity of 'teaching' undertaken there was nowhere near as much 'learning' from the students. Colleagues in the school asked the question 'What do we need to do to improve students' learning?' Their conclusion was to "... get away from old clichés and make it less 'schooly' than we had experienced as kids ...". We accepted that a change in this culture would require a 'radical' change in the school environment. The overall approach we adopted can be summarised as the implementation of structural changes that reinforce 'value-messages' within the school, which in turn promoted higher attainment. In this particular instance changes were introduced in the school timetable, in the school reward system, and in the praise processes. Lessons dominated by teacher talk were modified by changing the duration of the lesson, introducing a whole school emphasis on lesson planning and supporting individual pupils in a mentoring framework.

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Structural changes

The senior team looked at other schools, and came back with a three period/day model: i.e. 3 x 100 minute sessions. We prepared by focusing teachers' attention on the benefits of planning for extended periods of study. In addition, we decided on a policy of flexible breaks between each lesson. It was agreed with the staff to turn off the bells between sessions, leaving the teacher in control of whether – for example – they wanted 5 minutes longer.

Creating a focus on learning

Discussing these changes with colleagues it became clear that it wasn't the length of lesson, or structure of the day, per se, that gave rise to pedagogical change. What counted more was the school choosing a new approach to teaching and learning which offered teachers the opportunity to focus on lesson preparation and to rethink their classroom strategies: '100 minutes has absolutely focused people on planning. Pace, variety and challenge...' Teachers talked in terms of being "jolted ... out of doing the same" approach endlessly. There was evidence here to support the view that schools must change structures in order to change behaviour for teaching and learning.

Changing students' attitudes through praise and rewards

The structural changes to the school day ran in tandem with other cultural changes. (A useful analogy we used was to describe the lessons as the software, or applications, running on a computer; and the ethos of the school as the 'operating system'.) Changes to the ethos of the school included a new emphasis on promoting high achievement. We aimed to create a culture in which pupils were not embarrassed to do well, and would be celebrated in assemblies with a "... real sense of *razzamatazz* ..." Changes in the visual environment included the display of large photos celebrating individuals and teams around school, and the provision of potted plants.

Using mentoring to support students' learning

As a specialist 'sports college', the school places a strong emphasis on leadership; with students taking increased responsibility outside and inside lessons. This has worked particularly well with boys. There has been a residual issue with achievement by boys at the top end of the attainment scales; with evidence of a lack of motivation. As the project has developed, the staff has introduced an active mentoring programme. Last academic year they identified the fifty students who were our most significant underachievers around the C/D GCSE borderline: and paired each one with member of the senior leadership team (SLT), so that every SLT member had six students. Together they regularly looked at data, homework, grades, etc. called parents in, to tell them what we are doing, and then phoned parents with updates.

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The findings

At the outset, only 45% of students reported that they had pride in school, whereas the surveys now consistently return figures up to 90%.



One outcome of the first year of the mentoring scheme is that these students who were seen to be at risk of under-attainment through disaffection have in fact gained the 5 GCSEs we had as a target. More than 60% of them showed improvement over their target grades. 94% of the students said that the scheme had helped them to focus on their studies and wished the intervention had begun earlier. Students stopped their mentor in the corridor saying 'When are we next meeting to review my progress?' We are also redesigning the programme in the light of their feedback. Recent results show a rise from 62% A*-C to 74% A*-C at GCSE level for our students overall.

Early surveys also revealed that around 20% of students reported that they had been 'bullied', as a result of which we changed the deployment of staff at lunchtimes. Students no longer felt less secure in some places than others. This is an example of the way student feedback has informed our practice. Surveys now suggest that bullying is not perceived as an issue in the school.

Research methods

The nature of the project presented constant challenges in determining how to evaluate the success of the various interventions. John MacBeath has argued that schools need to measure what they value, and not (necessarily) value what they can readily measure.

We undertook a termly evaluation through the project; with the results published on the school web-site, in assemblies, and in conversations with pupils. The surveys were in the form of written questionnaires, and usually involved 100 – 150 students across year groups. Questions included: 'Have you been bullied during term? Whose assembly was best? Which teachers have helped you to learn better?' We always publish students' comments and talk in assemblies about the implications of their views and any changes we have been able to make as a result. We carried out separate termly surveys with staff.

Conclusions

The project provided sustained evidence of the success of introducing systemic change into a school to establish, reinforce, and exemplify the dominant values of the school culture. Furthermore, the outcomes provided a reassuring reminder that the values of a school, as they are made manifest, can make a very big difference to students' perception of belonging to the school.

Suggestions for further reading

Fullan, M and Hargreaves, A (1992) *What's Worth Fighting For in Your School?* Buckingham: Open University Press,

Hughes, M and Vass, A (2001) *Strategies for Closing the Learning Gap*. Stafford: Network Educational

Barber, M (1997) *The Learning Game*. London: Indigo

MacBeath, J E C (1999) *Schools Must Speak for Themselves: The Case for School Self-evaluation*. London: Routledge

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