

Raising Standards: what do we really want?

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ABSTRACT When taking up her headship of a one-form entry primary school in 'special measures' Alison Peacock's approach was to begin to rekindle joy amongst teachers in order to nurture and enhance the natural love of life and learning in children. She refused to label children by ability, preferring to value all individuals and celebrate success. Applying this to staff as well as to children, gradually the spark and the joy returned. In this now very successful school two points emerge particularly strongly. Firstly, an environment of discovery, team work and professional trust were more effective than current obsessions with rigorous lesson observation and targets. Secondly, through radical whole school student voice work a system of school democracy developed that had 'a revolutionary effect on our school'.

The current educational agenda within primary schools is dominated by the language of 'raising standards'. What does this mean? Standards of what? (SATs results? Behaviour? Compliance?) For who? Measured how? We need to be careful what we wish for.

This is the story of a one form entry primary school where the need to 'raise standards' was paramount. The school came off special measures in October 2003 when literacy and numeracy teaching was judged to be sound – but this is when the work really began. This article aims to demonstrate that schools have become so busy trying to do as they are told by a range of masters that they have forgotten to respond from the heart. Annabelle Dixon believed that one of the best indicators of school success was to witness a child joyfully skipping into the classroom. We need to rekindle joy amongst teachers in order that we can nurture and enhance the natural love of life and learning in our children.

Special Measures and the Feel of Failure

I took up my first headship in January 2003. My first impressions of the school were mixed. It was easy to see that things had gone badly wrong – there was an

air of neglect and depression, the children were suppressed and bored, staff were demotivated. I was moved by the importance of making things better and came away with the feeling that whatever I did as a new headteacher I probably couldn't make it any worse! The school was in special measures and been labelled as failing in May 2001. The school governors had battled with the Ofsted judgement and subsequently the LEA for over a year; ultimately the headteacher and chair of governors felt defeated and resigned.

On arrival at the school my first action was to interview the staff individually and ask them their views. It transpired that although the school had been in a category for almost two years no one else had thought to listen to the views of the teachers. The LEA offered high levels of intervention for the school aimed at improving teaching and learning but until my arrival no one had mediated that support. Potentially, therefore, a class teacher could have a monitoring visit from a numeracy consultant one day and a visit from the literacy team (possibly with conflicting advice re classroom organisation etc) the following day. The emphasis was on preparation for termly inspection by HMI and collecting monitoring evidence relentlessly.

The children were disinterested, bored and disengaged. They had no sense that anyone was interested in their opinions other than during the obligatory question and answer sessions within lessons where they were expected (and often refused) to recall knowledge. HMI judged that there was massive underachievement throughout the school.

The environment was poor. The majority of the classrooms were dilapidated and the classroom resources were locked away in second hand office furniture. Old bedspreads had been made into curtains to save money on blinds for the classrooms. The hall floor was filthy and unpolished. The school gates had peeling paint and the notice boards were broken. The play equipment on the playground was broken and had only partially been removed. Displays were non-existent. Staff reported that they had been told by the interim head not to put up displays until the date of the next HMI visit was announced 'to prevent them from getting tatty'.

Here was a school that had been labelled as failing. The atmosphere was one of mistrust, exhaustion and low morale. It was immediately apparent to me that what was needed was encouragement, revitalisation and a vision for the future that was full of hope.

Valuing All, Eradicating Fear

My first task was to establish a climate of trust. I needed the staff to trust me. I wanted them to believe that I was there to help them, listen to them, praise them when things went well and respond to their need for resources and inspiration. Closely aligned to this, I needed the children to believe that they had a voice and would be listened to. I had come from a school where pupil voice was central to our ethos. I had experienced working with Michael Fielding and Sara Bragg – see *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference* (Fielding

& Bragg 2003) – and knew the powerful potential of student voice for school development. In order to move forward as a team I wanted the children to be at the centre of our decision-making.

HMI commented that they were looking for lessons where teachers were prepared to take risks. However, this was unrealistic whilst the school was in special measures. It is very difficult to be innovative in a culture of blame and all creativity is lost when judgement and fear of failure is present. The staff had been labelled as part of a failing school and consequently their self esteem was low. They had taken on the role of the 'bottom set' and were finding it very difficult to gain the confidence to move away from this label.

Prior to taking up this post I had been part of the research that culminated in the publication of *Learning without Limits* (Hart et al, 2004). Central to this approach of teaching without ability labelling is a process of valuing all individuals and celebrating each success. Reflecting on my work with the staff I now realise that I applied the same principles to staff development. There was, however, a tough edge to this which gave me the strength to confront on occasions where I felt children were not being given a fair chance. Inevitably there were staff who needed and wanted to move away from the school, but the majority stayed. My aim was to work with every member of staff to help them recognise their strengths and to support them in their endeavours to learn whilst always putting the needs of the children first.

Getting the Spark Back

Arriving at the school it was clear that we needed to get the spark back – a sense of fun, some joy.

The teachers were exhausted. I gave them non teaching time and quality feedback time so that they knew they had a voice and were being listened to. Wherever possible, their requests for new resources were responded to and the school began to feel more loved.

The children were demotivated. Determined to show them that things could be different we brought in drama specialists, artists, a teenage rock band, anyone we could think of to enliven the atmosphere. Everyone needed to discover that this school could be an exciting place to be. These visits gave the staff an opportunity to witness their children responding differently and also provided rich CPD opportunities that were nothing to do with criticism of their teaching or providing targets for improvement. A wide variety of opportunities were provided for teachers simply to enjoy learning with the youngsters in their class.

We began a programme of refurbishment and renewal. We successfully bid for a NOF grant and children, families and staff redesigned the playground.

At the beginning of the second term we initiated whole school circle meeting groups. Every week we spend fifteen minutes each Tuesday morning, meeting in mixed aged groups and discussing a shared agenda. The circles are now run by Year 6 students who also take notes of decisions reached. This

system of whole school democracy involving all children and staff has had a revolutionary effect on our school.

Some of the actions arising from circle meetings have included, new playground equipment, the setting up of the Wroxham café and breakfast club and establishment of Wroxham Radio. These initiatives were discussed by everyone and crucially were then implemented with regular opportunities for comment and feedback. We slowly but surely began to develop a whole school community that had a sense of pride in achievement. Everyone is valued and both staff and children share in decision making.

Renewed Professionalism and Self-belief

When we came off special measures in 2003, key issues included the development of staff roles as subject leaders. Following reflection and discussion our leadership team decided to remove the traditional burden of individual subject leadership for the foundation subjects and replace this with faculty teams comprising members of teaching staff, support staff and governors. This team approach fitted well with our school ethos and gave status to our aims of involving and valuing all staff members.

Staff development is so important if we want schools to be centres of learning, instead of factories. At the time of writing, we have four support staff who are approaching their third year studying for a degree, one county leading numeracy teacher and a recently assessed advanced skills teacher. Our Foundation Stage leader is about to leave our school to join the advisory service. All of these staff were in post when I took up headship in January 2003. Through renewed professionalism and self belief these staff are true models of 'raised standards'. Their individual achievements as outstanding members of staff have not, however, come about through rigorous lesson observations and targets but through flourishing in an environment of discovery, team work and trust.

Our children are encouraged to lead their own learning. Self assessment and peer assessment has become a rich part of many of our classes. We hold Learning Review Days for our Year 5 and Year 6 students where they come out of class to an appointment with the headteacher, class teacher, teaching assistant and parents to discuss their learning. These days take place twice a year and have been very well attended by parents. Our children on the special needs register also attend review meetings and all children in Key Stage 2 now take part in parent consultation evenings. Through formative assessment and open dialogue about teaching and learning we know our children increasingly well and help them to achieve excellent progress through self reflection and a desire to improve still further.

Teachers plan for learning in the way that suits them best. There is no requirement for them to 'prove' this by giving me copies of paper work. The evidence of good planning and responsiveness is apparent in each classroom through the teacher's enthusiasm, the wide variety of activities, a dynamic

environment and the children's delight. There is no need to attend days of training on lesson observation and school evaluation to know within minutes of walking into a classroom whether real learning is taking place.

Some classes have begun to trial ways of teaching that resist labelling by ability. Children are given much more responsibility to select appropriate levels of tasks and to opt into enrichment groups such as Springboard Maths rather than being directed towards them. The principles are the same as those put into place when we turned the school around. If you enable people to have the self knowledge and confidence to ask for help when they need it rather than making ability judgements about what they need to 'move them on' then the subsequent learning will be much richer and much more sustainable.

We track the individual progress of our children very carefully in order that we can help them to achieve the next steps in their learning. This is seen as a team approach, however, with the child at the centre. Half termly assessment meetings take place where the class teacher and support staff meet with the deputy headteacher and myself to review the progress of each child. We adopt a team approach to assessment and take joint responsibility for improving what we offer to help everyone reach their potential. This is what I mean by responding from the heart. We want our children to have the best possible education. There has to be rigour associated with enabling learning opportunities to take place and for potential impact to be maximised. The best opportunities are usually experiential and teachers know this. We are not in an 'either or' situation. The optimum way of improving children's capacity to achieve is to provide a rich stimulating educational experience alongside an explicit dialogue about the teaching and learning process.

The Excitement of Active, Experiential Learning

The school has become a dynamic, exciting place to be. We hosted a visit from the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit last year and we were delighted that our practice was described as 'inspirational'. Our whole school circle meetings were featured in the Times Educational Supplement and we won an ICT innovation award this year for the development of our school radio station.

I hope that we remember all that is good: love of learning, excitement related to teaching and a curriculum that understands that children's learning should be active and experiential. We have the privilege of watching our children flower, the courage to learn from each other and the excitement of being on a learning journey together where it truly feels that anything is possible. As Emily, in Year 5, explains: 'When your mum asks you what you've learnt today – you've got so much to tell her'.

Primary teachers are often obedient. They want to do the 'right thing' and not to cause a fuss. Too often there is a feeling that someone more expert than us probably knows best. This collective compliance has been disastrous for primary schools in the last decade. As a profession, how did we allow ourselves to be persuaded that an industrial model of target setting based on arbitrary

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levels of improvement would raise standards? We know that every child is different and that the key to their success is to celebrate this.

Let us maintain all the best of what we have learnt about sharing the dialogue of teaching and learning with our students whilst enriching our daily experience of what it means to be part of a learning community. Creativity, enthusiasm, excitement, passion, spirituality, emotion – all of these need to be engaged to create schools of the future where we can have it all. This way we will keep the best of our staff and ensure that we attract the best for the future.

If you're not inspired, how can you inspire others?

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References

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