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# Fresh Start: a model for success and sustainable change

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the rationale and debate of the 'Fresh Start' schools policy introduced by the New Labour Government in 1997 as a vehicle for improvement in schools that historically had been classified as 'failing'. Underpinning the policy is the assumption that Fresh Start can act as a catalytic agent of positive change to performance, school cultures and the school community. Dr Matthews' involvement with the case study primary school began when she became a governor four months after the school received its new Fresh Start status in May 2000.

## **Introduction**

The article traces the transformation process and outlines the profile of the first Fresh Start primary school in England with a population of 40% Travellers on the school roll. It includes an early evaluation of a number of initiatives associated with catalytic change and school improvement that have been employed in the case study school, in other Fresh Start primary schools in England and in socio-economically disadvantaged schools around the world. It evaluates the impact of three key initiatives: the breakfast club, a school-wide literacy scheme, *Success for All*, introduced in 1997 and community education based in the school. The impact of these initiatives is considered within the context of the school, the school community and government policy. The study findings conclude that Fresh Start together with the initiatives have been effective strategies for improvement in the case study school, and may provide a good model for other schools in similar circumstances.

## **The Case Study**

The case study primary school is situated on the outskirts of an outer London borough. Some 2.8% of the population in the immediate vicinity (March 2005) are on job seeker's allowance, which does not reflect the pocket of deprivation

that the school serves as the ward includes some affluent areas (2.2% is the overall figure on job seeker's allowance for the borough) (Nomis, 2001). According to the head teacher, the school's catchment area has high unemployment, 'in the region of 80%', although 'this borough is one of the most advantaged London boroughs' [and] 'the proportion of adults in higher social classes is well above the national average'. The area the school serves has one of the largest concentrations of Traveller families in Europe. The school suffered from a poor reputation for many years, causing many local families to select alternative schools for their children. It was characterised by low attendance, poor behaviour and high teacher turnover. Furthermore, for a small school, it had an unusually large behaviour unit representing over a quarter of the school's role.

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) Report of November 1998, which put the former school into Special Measures, confirmed the local education authority's (LEA) concern over the long-term decline of the school. Relationships between the Governing Body and the Council were poor and the governors had lost confidence in the LEA. Twenty-four issues for action were identified involving the leadership and management and the quality of teaching and learning. In 1999, the acting head teacher was appointed as the head teacher, who with the support of two experienced existing members of staff (Deputy Head and Special Educational Needs Coordinator [SENCO]), and an outstanding link adviser, formed a powerful core team.

The case study outlines the process of change and investigates key factors and initiatives that have been implemented to date and are considered by the staff, governors and Ofsted to have contributed to the school's improved performance while increasing its long-term viability. It evaluates Fresh Start policy and the three initiatives that have brought about a changed ethos and school improvement.

Policy documents, surveys, observations, questionnaires and interviews were used to gather data. A multi-method approach of collecting similar data from different sources reduced bias and increased validity. The time scale of 15 months to carry out this study, together with the pilot studies carried out during the previous year, further strengthened the credibility and validity by prolonging the researcher's engagement in the field.

The key determinants involved in selecting the sample were size, its representativeness, accessibility and the sampling strategy. The size was determined by key personnel at the school, ancillary staff, participants at the Community Wing, and representatives of external bodies involved during and since the transition. The school provided an ideal point of access for the majority of the data collection. The sample for the case study comprised: two governors, the head teacher, the deputy head, all the teaching and non-teaching staff, two reception staff, the cook, the crèche leader, two Traveller Support staff, the coordinator of the Community Wing, and 30 parents. The external bodies involved included the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), Her

Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), the LEA, Children Project leader, a school doctor, 35 adult students and 15 existing Fresh Start primary head teachers.

### **School Improvement**

Over the last three decades, school improvement has been an issue that has occupied researchers and policy makers globally. Many countries are pursuing school improvement policies to enhance quality and raise standards of achievement, in an attempt to meet the demands of a global economy. A key turning point in Britain's educational policy was the delivery of the famous Ruskin College Speech by the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, in 1976. This heralded a new approach to curriculum, standards of achievement and accountability in schools. Doubts about the overall effectiveness of the existing inspection system were also raised at the same time.

Almost 20 years later, in 1993, a radically different inspection system for schools was implemented, in an attempt to raise standards and increase transparency and accountability in schools. As a consequence of the new inspection system, conducted through the Ofsted, some schools fail their inspection. One solution available for schools in this position is Fresh Start, in which a school 'reinvents' itself with increased funding and new initiatives.

Early research on equality of opportunity (Coleman et al, 1966; Jencks et al, 1972) and a subsequent longitudinal study carried out by Rutter et al (1979) formed the origins of the school effectiveness debate. Since these early studies, subsequent research has shown that despite low socio-economic status, schools *can* make a difference to their students' life chances (MacBeath & Mortimore, 2001; Maden, 2001; Muijs et al, 2004). However Chitty (2002) and Thrupp (1999) take a cautionary approach to this view, suggesting that poverty is still a factor and, as Ian Woodhead has pointed out, poverty has actually left some students with 'a bigger mountain to climb' (quoted in the *Guardian*, 2 March 2000).

Raising the opportunities of socially disadvantaged children has formed part of this long debate, including the impact that disadvantage has on reading, performance, attendance, achievement, further education and lifelong learning. Fresh Start policy is a controversial attempt to treat these and other challenges with a 'whole school' solution that hitherto has not been attempted. Historically, governments have paid insufficient attention to tackle the problem of child poverty in a systematic way or indeed recognised the importance of the relationship between social disadvantage and educational opportunity in the way that New Labour is attempting to do. By combining social and education policy, the Government has pledged to eradicate child poverty within a generation. However, recent reports of the suggested abandonment of the Government's much lauded Sure Start programme introduced to tackle deprivation in disadvantaged areas highlight the ongoing dilemma of 'whether the funding will match the ambitions' (5 January 2005). Despite these

unresolved issues, New Labour still seems determined to pursue policies to raise standards and educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

### **Fresh Start and Reconstitution**

The concept of Fresh Start schools lies within the framework of school improvement policy and was originally proposed as an option for schools in Special Measures in the Government's White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997). Fresh Start, like many recent policies, for example, *Educational Priority Areas*, originated in the USA with the American model of 'Reconstitution'. New Labour's policy of targeted school improvement initiatives relates to the Fresh Start model aimed at creating opportunities for a new ethos within the same social environment.

#### **Reconstitution: the American model**

In 1984 a radical policy initiative called 'Reconstitution' was introduced in the USA for failing schools. In essence, 'the administrator tears down the school to build it up again with a new staff, new principal, and a new curriculum' (Whitmire, 1997). School reconstitutions were aimed at troubled schools in poor neighbourhoods, recruiting staff eager to take on the challenge of educating children who are difficult to manage and teach. 'Zero tolerance' of failure drove much of this new government initiative. 'We cannot and must not tolerate failing schools', commented US Education Secretary Richard W. Riley. It has been used to describe intervention strategies that range from the restructuring of school leadership, mandated redesign of a school's programme and instructional practices, to state takeover of school governance. In its most extreme form, reconstitution involves the disbanding of the existing faculty and replacing nearly all the school's staff.

The UK approach to Fresh Start was partially modelled on reconstitution despite claims that the initiative was politically popular but educationally bankrupt. It is based on the idea that it requires a great deal of investment in creating a brand new school in a situation which is inherently difficult. More recent research suggests that reconstitution can work as a reform strategy if certain considerations are met. These include sufficient initial and long-term funding, replacing the 'weakest' teachers first rather than all teachers at the start, community involvement at the outset to promote home/school links and substantial incentives to attract a skilled staff.

#### **Fresh Start: the British model**

Twelve years after 'Reconstitution' was introduced in the USA, a similar Manifesto commitment was announced in England as part of New Labour's vision of 'zero tolerance of underperformance'.

Every school has the capacity to succeed. All Local Education Authorities (LEAs) must demonstrate that every school is improving. For those failing schools unable to improve, ministers will order a 'Fresh Start' – close the school and start afresh on the same site. (Labour Party, 1997)

Fresh Start schools provide a unique focus in the area of school improvement and have been established for nearly six years. In most cases they have been introduced in schools that comprise a high proportion of pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds with below average academic attainment that have failed to meet certain criteria in an Ofsted inspection. Schools that have failed their Ofsted inspections have been an ongoing source for school improvement research and Fresh Start schools are beginning to emerge as an interesting dimension within the area of low socio-economic communities. They link the concepts that have developed from school effectiveness and school improvement such as context, culture, leadership, learning organisations, partnerships, planning, teaching and learning. Many of these concepts have been key issues for the development of successful practice and are seen in the case study school and in many other Fresh Start primary schools in England.

The Fresh Start Model was a targeted attempt by New Labour to tackle deprivation and improve schools within the state educational system. The initiative was implemented in schools from 1998 and coexisted with *Education Action Zones* and *Excellence in Cities*. The Fresh Start Model involves a substantial injection of funding and frequently involves interacting with other agencies such as health services, adult education and the police, to improve the life chances of individuals within their communities. They have been largely successful, particularly in the primary sector.

It is a radical approach to securing school improvement for those schools in Special Measures showing insufficient evidence of recovery. Schools put in Special Measures have limited choices for survival. Staying in Special Measures for up to two years is the most popular choice, with the real hope that the school will have improved sufficiently for the tag to be lifted. There are similarities in the recommendations for improvement in schools in Special Measures and Fresh Start schools, including: strong leadership by the head teacher, effective management by senior staff, committed teachers intent on improving standards, good communications between the school, parents and the community, tackling poor behaviour and attendance and effective financial planning. Despite the similar approach in both models, the fundamental difference that Fresh Start can make is an overall freedom and expectation to make profound, systemic change. Fresh Start schools are not only considered to be a real alternative, but also as a last resort for schools that have been put in Special Measures after a poor inspection. Opting for Fresh Start obviously involves upheaval for the school, community, LEA and the DfEE, with continuous inspections from HMI. An Ofsted inspection follows one or two years after the setting up of the new school.

The majority of Fresh Start schools in the primary sector in the United Kingdom have adopted the 'most extreme form' of school reconstitution in the USA. Fresh Start offers the opportunity of a 'clean break' from a 'troubled past' and is an attempt to create a completely new model with an ambitious sense of purpose. The long-term aim is to establish a new, thriving, viable, successful school. A school may be closed on one day and opened as a new school on the following day on the same site, but with a new identity and frequently with a new staff, governors, vision, environment, initiatives and extra funding. Many of these principles have been recognised as effective intervention strategies for schools in challenging circumstances (Fullan 1992; Hopkins & Harris, 1997).

Fresh Start schools have a newly appointed head teacher whose commitment, leadership and management skills are considered to be crucially important to the future success of the new school. Data collected from interviews with primary Fresh Start head teachers for this study would support this view. The role of the new head teacher is similar to any successful business leader who manages change within their organisation with the help of a supportive infrastructure. The principle of replacing the management team of a failing business in an attempt to achieve success is well established in the business world. A new managing director selected on past achievements has, in some cases, reversed the fortunes of struggling companies. Similarly, Fresh Start involves difficult decisions, including replacing senior management staff and governors. New procedures are introduced and often additional funding will be put in place. Although state schools seem to be moving closer to a business model with more emphasis on cost effectiveness and efficiency, they are not and probably should never be perceived as a business. Nevertheless, unsuccessful Fresh Start schools are not dissimilar to failing businesses, in which the new management team have not performed as well as expected and should be subject to further review or replaced.

New governing bodies have a vital and influential role to play in Fresh Start schools. In some cases governors are appointed by the LEA for expediency. Scanlon et al (1999) specifically explore the relationship between effective schools and effective governance. The newly appointed head teacher, along with the governing body, identifies the priority needs and initiatives for the school and seeks the appropriate funding for them to be executed as outlined in Ofsted (2002). The substantial funding involved requires sound financial management.

By December 2000 when 25 Fresh Start schools were already open and two had been closed, strong guidelines were issued by the School Standards Minister, Estelle Morris, to local authorities stressing their accountability with this initiative.

Local education authorities must be prepared to consider tough local decisions to close schools that have been failing their pupils for two years or more. Normally, a school should close if it consistently fails to raise standards for local pupils. Fresh Start is about raising standards in the most challenging circumstances – it is not an easy

option and cannot be used to avoid local difficulties for schools that should close.

She also outlined the mechanisms in place for the Government's accountability.

We are working closely with the existing Fresh Start schools to help them improve and termly OFSTED inspections are showing that a number of Fresh Start schools are making real progress. (DfEE, 2000).

Currently there are 44 Fresh Start schools, 21 secondary and 23 primary schools. This represents a very small percentage of only 0.16% of all schools in England.

One of the hallmarks of the Fresh Start model has been the expansion of the schools' horizons by forming partnerships with parents, the local school community and health services which is in line with many recent government initiatives. The positive new image that Fresh Start has frequently created in the locality is an ideal springboard to initiate those connections and many schools have already begun this process as the case study highlights.

### **Process and Findings**

From the initial embryonic stage, the process of becoming a Fresh Start school received early support from parents, staff and the newly appointed governing body. As one governor stated, 'We had the opportunity to raise objections but we felt very positive that this was the right way forward' and a parent agreed, 'I think it's a very good idea, when people feel that a school is failing they are given the opportunity to see a Fresh Start'.

The head teacher recalled, 'The major advantage at the start was that it couldn't get worse'. The HMI attached to the school during this period emphasised the importance of getting everyone involved; as she recalled, 'Fresh Start was planned. The head, the governors and the LEA were all involved'. The head teacher further reinforced the notion of involvement:

The school community was consulted on everything, from the logo to the uniform, we held meetings to discuss ideas about the uniform and the children were involved designing the logo. I felt we're in this together and we're going to make it work. We didn't want to waste any time getting it under way.

### **A Model for Change**

The transformation process involved two strands: systemic school improvement and three key initiatives.

1. *System change* brought about complete structural change to the former school, resulting in:

- A new head teacher with an entrepreneurial approach, and a vision that has been consistent and shared with staff, parents, children and external agencies. This has been achieved through a transformational and distributed leadership style. The head teacher was specially appointed and has remained in post since the outset, providing continuity for the school.
- A new staff that were recruited on the basis of the head teacher's former personal experience of their capabilities and suitability for the new school context. They have been recognised and remunerated accordingly and all have remained in post since the outset, providing continuity for the school.
- Additional government funding covering the first three years of Fresh Start was essential in the initial transformation process and, equally important, has been phased and managed by the school over a five-year period. This has ensured the school's future sustainability.

Furthermore,

- The school has benefited from the support from several external agencies that have provided a commitment and expertise from the outset and have all worked effectively together. Previous knowledge and expertise of Fresh Start by the DfES in the secondary sector provided a good foundation for supporting a new venture in the primary sector. The HMI endorsed the Fresh Start option and has provided expertise and continuous support that has been constructive and well received. The LEA gave positive support, providing a very competent link adviser who has remained with the school since the outset, providing continuity for the school.
- The new governing body brought a considerable amount of educational expertise and have been committed to ongoing school improvement. The majority of the governors are still in post after six years, which has provided continuity for the school.
- Sustaining school improvement has been achieved over the past six years by all the above factors, together with the adopted initiatives outlined in the case study.

2. *Initiatives*: Breakfast Club, Success for All Literacy Scheme (SFA) and a Community Wing.

- A breakfast club was introduced at the case study school to address poor nutrition, punctuality and truancy. This was found to have a significant impact on improved attendance, punctuality, concentration, behaviour, nutrition and socialisation opportunities for the approximately 60% of pupils who attend it, while

increasing opportunities for socialisation for parents and staff. The combination of these individual aspects has made a positive impact on teaching and learning and the school climate.

- The Success for All Literacy Scheme (SFA) was introduced to raise low literacy levels, incorporate Traveller pupils, improve monitoring and evaluation, improve discipline and provide a focus for whole-school staff development. Implementing the innovative school-wide literacy strategy has positively contributed towards cooperative learning, discipline, inclusion, monitoring, evaluation and continuous professional development, while constructively involving the whole school in the focused task of raising literacy levels.
- The initial aims of the Community Wing initiative were to improve children's attainment and development; engage in their children's education; raise self-esteem; identify needs early and make appropriate interventions; tackle whole family health issues; reduce disaffection and exclusion and develop activities and programmes that were parent-driven. The initiative has provided learning opportunities for the school community and locally based Travellers. It incorporates government policies including lifelong learning, inclusion and community schools, embracing initiatives like *'Extended Schools'*. The Community Wing has been limited in its success in terms of attracting parents, embracing extensive school involvement and latterly a coherent strategy due to its imminent possible closure. However, for those who have taken advantage of these learning opportunities, it has made a positive impact. A school-based, multi-agency, 'bottom-up' approach underlies the success of this initiative. It has increased learning opportunities while reducing social exclusion, particularly at the outset for Travellers in the local area. The future of the Community Wing in its present form is uncertain and any decisions involving change are likely to impact on the whole-school community. The parties involved need to focus on finding the most effective way forward for this school community to continue to access non-threatening, accessible lifelong learning opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

This case study contributes to knowledge by examining the complex change process involved in the Fresh Start renewal that has led to school improvement. It is the combination of a specific coherent strategy involving key factors, supported by three initiatives that have been crucial for success in this context. Supporting evidence in the case study school illustrates that by creating links between the three main initiatives, namely, a breakfast club, SFA and a

Community Wing, an opportunity has been provided for focused school-wide development, staff development and classroom development while creating a coherent positive school ethos (see Joyce et al, 1999). Furthermore, the school has focused on broader notions of accountability to turn itself around, including investments in teacher knowledge and skill, organisational change to support teacher and student learning, systems of assessment that drive curriculum reform and improvements in teaching. It is the powerful combination of these initiatives in this context together with the head teacher's entrepreneurial leadership style and support from the governing body, the LEA, HMI and the DfES, that is the key to the school's current success.

In November 2002 Ofsted reported that

the headteacher, staff and governors have worked hard to make a success of the new school. Good teamwork under the very effective leadership of the headteacher, ably supported by the deputy head teacher, has helped the school progress well in these early years. The school has been successful in creating a harmonious community where pupils get along well and their behaviour is good.

The case study school has been strengthened by the reform initiative of Fresh Start. This initiative has incorporated change at a national, local and school level, combining entrepreneurial leadership, professional autonomy and intelligent accountability with comprehensive external support, bringing rapid and radical change and sustained school improvement while positively transforming the lives and raising aspirations within a small community. This surely should be applauded as an example of a successful venture that fulfils many intrinsic aims of education.

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