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## Taking off into a Strong Headwind: creating truly comprehensive, human- scale secondary education against the prevailing gales of performativity

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**ABSTRACT** Stanley Park High was designated a Building Schools for the Future 'One School Pathfinder' in 2006, and charged with being innovative in all aspects of schooling. This article, which prefaces a number of forthcoming contributions about interconnected practices at the school, focuses on the journey of reform, one that has rightly challenged the dominant and compliant view, and that embraces the progressive tradition of comprehensive education in order to unleash the innate creativity of our students and the professional capital of our teachers.

### **Local Context**

About 15 years ago my family was returning from a ski holiday in France. Upon arrival at Chambéry Airport it quickly became apparent that all was not well with the incoming and outgoing flights. Closely framed by the Alps on three sides and fringed by Lake Bourget, Chambéry is described by the January 2015 edition of *Spectator* magazine as 'the charming little airport that ruins thousands of holidays'. Given the topography, it is not surprising that it frequently suffers delays, with it being ranked second worst in 2014 for delays of three hours (*Daily Telegraph*, January 2015).

The adverse weather meant that our delay was considerably longer than the average, but we eventually taxied to the start of the runway. Rain was sheeting down, the wings were buffeted by the strong wind and we sat for what appeared to be an extraordinarily long time waiting for the jet engines to kick in. The pilot came over the intercom to inform us that the weather wasn't great, but there was a small window of opportunity to take off in about 90 seconds'

time, and 'he was going to give it a go'. Cue mild panic, and the worst take-off I have ever experienced. The plane appeared to lurch from side to side, repeatedly gaining height and dropping like a stone before we eventually rose above the prevailing weather conditions.

Although the timescales are different, there is undoubtedly a very strong analogy between the early stages of that flight and the transformation of Stanley Park High since 2006.

The school sits in the relatively small London borough of Sutton. There are 14 secondary schools. Driving to school in during 2005/2006 felt stormy. While it was not necessarily a large number involved, it was symbolically significant that local children were seen migrating away from the school wearing the uniforms of our near neighbours. The perceived success of others was the pull factor, but equally our exam results, league table position and general reputation were the push. Reversing this movement was going to be difficult. We simply didn't have the trust of the local community.

Local circumstances made it challenging, and continue to do so. There is considerable local selection. This isn't in a formal region-wide 11+ sense, but in a school-based entrance exam one. Consequently, there are five local grammars, all of which appear in the top 30 state schools for attainment at the end of key stage 4. In addition, there are two faith schools, and four other 'non-selectives' that have utilised some form of selection – 'equal banding', paired primaries, entrance tests and aptitude assessments based on sporting or performing arts excellence. As a result, Stanley Park High was very much a secondary modern secondary modern! We needed to transform if we were going to survive, but how were we to do it?

### **Opportunity for Innovation**

We were unexpectedly given a boost by being designated the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) 'One School Pathfinder' for the London Borough of Sutton in July 2006. About 25 local authorities in England were given the opportunity of developing one such school. The criterion for selecting the school was that it had to be the most disadvantaged in terms of student intake and the quality of its existing building/facilities. We ticked both of these boxes by some considerable distance, and so we were given the task of reimagining comprehensive secondary schooling in terms of leadership structures, curricula, learning and teaching, learning spaces and ICT/media. Doing the same as we had been doing was not an option; just as well really, because our traditional ways of teaching weren't working. Students were disengaged and unhappy.

It would have been helpful if the 'innovative 25' from across the country had been given the chance to collaborate, but it is a damning indictment of England's innovation in education that schools worked almost in total isolation. These schools were never introduced, there was no sharing of ideas and, as a result, this country missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to use professional capital to transform the entire system.

We had to envisage something different; something that would not only work for our local community, but also provide a role model to enthuse others to develop a twenty-first-century education. We set out on a journey to find our values and envision a new school. Initially, a visit to Bishops Park College in Clacton, under the inspirational leadership of Mike Davies, opened our eyes to possibilities (see Davies, 2005). Mike was a former headteacher of Stantonbury Campus in Milton Keynes, where his development of halls in a ‘schools-within-a-school’ structure, combined with an innovative curriculum and significant pedagogic reform, had resulted in a truly radical state school.

Bishops Park was clearly influenced by this radical approach. It was built as three ‘schools-within-a school’ (Windmills, Towers and Lighthouses), and his vision was of an egalitarian community where students found and grew their talents and self-esteem, their pride and their dignity.

A key feature was the ‘Tartan Curriculum’ which aimed to guide its KS3 students towards National Curriculum goals but largely eschewed traditional subject-based lessons. Instead, a team of seven or eight teachers within each mini-school devised a scheme of thematic work for each half-term, and students worked on this for about three quarters of their curriculum time. The teaching teams used cross-curricular approaches to find ways of making coherent links between subjects across a particular theme, so that these were interwoven rather than compartmentalised – hence the ‘Tartan Curriculum’.

Through Mike, human scale education (HSE) was introduced to us. We were heavily influenced by its thinking on educating on a human scale, where structures, teaching practices and learning environments combine to ensure all students are known and valued. Through HSE we became aware of the Coalition of Essential Schools in the USA ([www.essentialschools.org](http://www.essentialschools.org)), which was set up following publication of Ted Sizer’s book *Horace’s Compromise* (Sizer, 1984). It began as a network of 12 schools but by 2016 had more than 600, all collaborating under the banner of ‘common principles for uncommon schools’. Basically, it represented the start of the US whole school reform or redesign movement, with each model tending to be based upon a set of shared design principles, such as:

- Less is more – depth over coverage;
- Personalisation – built on profound knowledge of learners;
- Student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach;
- Assessment based on demonstration of mastery and real tasks.

Fast forward to this millennium and Mary Tasker, former Chair of HSE, writing in *Smaller Structures in Secondary Education* (Tasker, 2003), describes how charitable organisations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation of New York and the Annenberg Challenge supported the US Department of Education Smaller Learning Communities Initiatives. They resolved to break up large high schools and turn them into ‘small schools’ – small learning communities of 350 or fewer students. They believed that small high schools would lift graduation rates and student achievement, especially

among minority students, because the strong relationships between students and teachers would ensure that learners were profoundly well known.

Our journey of discovery took us to visit some of these schools in Boston and New York: Fenway High School, Mission Hill (under the leadership of Deborah Meier), Boston Arts Academy and Urban Academy. It also took us to have a look at Danish schools in Copenhagen. We were particularly inspired by Hellerup Skole, which was innovative even by Danish standards – an all-through school, with learning enabled in flexible ways and in a variety of learning environments, but clearly focused on the centrality of each child's and young person's needs. We took all of our staff, and a cross-section of our students, and immersed them in Hellerup for a few days to broaden horizons. It was invaluable.

Linking these visits, it became clear that the creation and development of effective relationships were of fundamental importance, particularly at key transition periods. Many students cope with these changes admirably, but others find them traumatic, particularly moving from a typically small primary schools to significantly larger secondary schools. Consequently, our first question in determining the structure and practice of the new Stanley Park High was 'will this improve relationships?' If the answer was in the negative, we didn't do it, even if it could raise our exam results, improve our position in the league table and find favour with Ofsted inspectors.

### **Schools-within-Schools and the Development of an Integrated, Exploratory Curriculum**

Our 'small schools' are the key structures in fostering excellent relationships. Being a lead school for human scale education, we strongly believe that children and young people flourish because the human scale experience enables them to form excellent relationships with a smaller number of adults. Consequently, we have developed structures and practice to enable this to happen. We have four schools – Horizon, Performance, Trade and World – within Stanley Park High and these are located around an atrium, very much the central heart. Every September, 70 students enter each of Performance, Trade and World. It becomes very much their home school throughout their school careers. A common misconception is that students are allocated one of the schools because they have a particular attribute. This is not the case, with the populations being equal in terms of gender, ethnicity, prior attainment and a range of other important characteristics. Horizon is slightly different, housing our two opportunity bases for students for Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), a provision we believe to be unique within a mainstream secondary setting in England.

Simply placing students in one of our small schools and replicating the current transition model of most schools (i.e. one teacher in Year 6 to upwards of 14 teachers in Year 7) does not enable excellent relationships. In each of these schools, and alongside English, maths, science, MFL, PE and music, the

students study our own Excellent Futures Curriculum [EFC]. In operation for eight years, it predates our new school building which opened in January 2012. It covers 12 out of 29 lessons a week and it is taught in large studios in each of the three small schools. The pedagogy is committed to the principle of the educability of all young people and is based on a constructivist model, with authentic learning outcomes. These include: designing, producing and marketing a food product that is evaluated by our catering company and subsequently becomes part of their menu; creating and performing a short play about trench warfare for primary schoolchildren who have sensory needs; and developing a fashion show for the local community with items created from recycled materials.

The existence of our EFC means that the teacher has the time get to know each of his/her students very well. It is our belief that you cannot teach a child unless their uniqueness is valued and they are known well. The first half-term in Year 7 is very important. We endeavour to find out about each child – their interests, their passions and what makes them tick. We also make sure the students know and understand what it is like to be a ‘Stanley Parker’. In EFC, in each of the schools the students spend the first half-term producing and publishing an A-Z book called a *Being a Stanley Parker*.

Relationships are again at the forefront of our thinking when at the end of Year 8 the students draw on a portfolio of evidence to graduate from the EFC. At these student-led conferences the student leads a meeting with their parent/carer and for thirty minutes engages in an explanation of what they had been learning, why it was important to them, what they had learnt and how they thought this would inform their next steps in learning. This has been so successful that parents no longer hanker after class positions, grades or levels. They want to be part of the narrative and know about their child’s learning and how they can contribute to it ... a dynamic partnership built on dialogue. Words, artefacts, videos, portfolios of beautifully crafted and rigorous work are the lingua franca of the exchange, not numbers and numerical data. The latter represent a different way of thinking and, to many parents’ minds, a reductionist con that confines the role of the parent to a consumer, with learning seen as a mass-market commodity, like a product on the commercial market.

The EFC graduation marks one of the key transitions within the school; a time when the formation of new relationships is of paramount importance. Year 9 sees students move from horizontal year-based tutor groups in years 7 and 8 to small vertical tutor groups with representatives from each of the years 9, 10 and 11. These provide the crucial opportunity for students to develop relationships with others of a different age. In addition to the tutoring arrangements, students participate in our Taster Options programme. All students, alongside English, maths, PE, RS and science, have the opportunity to try eight termly tasters – four in each of autumn and spring – from our portfolio of 27 courses. Each of the subjects, together with the learning within them, is seen to be of equal value. Consequently, students are free to choose from an impressive range of subjects, and we make no attempt to enforce curricula in

order to hit school accountability measures. These include some subjects that are less common in other schools, such as childcare, construction, design/engineer/construct, hairdressing, horticulture and motor vehicle engineering. Crucially, the pedagogy continues to be based on a constructivist model with authentic learning outcomes. For example, in the history taster option, students are required to produce a video on Jack the Ripper that will feature in a local museum.

### **Has Our Innovation Worked?**

Has our innovation worked? Have we reduced the migration to other local schools? Have we become more of a community school? Our journey has not been dissimilar to the flight from Chambery. We have flown into a headwind of some resistance, not from the local community, but certainly from some sections of the education world. Innovation doesn't run smoothly, so we have experienced the sudden drops, and these have frequently been seized upon by some as evidence that what we are doing is all wrong. Luckily, we have been able to overcome these and are now experiencing less turbulence. Unfortunately, we continue to feel that we are flying alone. Any of the other 24 One School Pathfinders joining us in a collective endeavour would have made it significantly easier, and more beneficial to all concerned.

So in answer to the questions above, undoubtedly our approach has meant we have become more popular, with the number of first-choice applicants trebling since 2006 and our catchment area shrinking significantly. Having chosen our school, more want to attend on a daily basis. Over the same period, attendance has increased from 87% to 94.5%, and punctuality has improved significantly. On average we only have 14 students late per day. Our results have also improved. Between 2005 and 2016 our 5+ A\*-C including English and maths has increased from 15% to 60%, the national average.

Ofsted (November 2015) stated: 'The ... vision has created an innovative and imaginative school where pupils are very successfully prepared for their future lives. Practically all pupils respond to the school's motto of 'igniting a passion for learning'. This is done by blending positive relationships in small classes (human scale education) with an exciting curriculum which 'empowers pupils with skills such as empathy. Pupils' outstanding behaviour and relationships with each other and with teachers underpin their enthusiasm and willingness to learn.'

Establishing the long-term impact is more challenging, but it would make an interesting piece of research. We have consistently scored 100% for our destination data over the last few years, with all students moving on to further education, training or employment, but other than in isolated cases, we are unaware as to what happens to them further into the future. Will our students live the lives of 'Stanley Parkers'? Will their lives be characterised by an ability to form good relationships with others? Will they hold jobs for which they

have a passion? Will they contribute positively to the local community? Will they be happy?

Our designation as a One School Pathfinder required us to be innovative in the ways described earlier, whilst ensuring we responded to the needs of our local community. It also required us to be a role model for others to follow. Few have followed in our footsteps in reality, especially in England, although our example has excited more emulation overseas. It is difficult to say why more English schools haven't adopted an innovative approach. We probably have not sold our story as well as we might, which is why we have developed SPIRA [1] over the last couple of years.

We continue to hope that others will fly with us. Like the ascent out of Chambery, it might be a bouncy ride, and there will be times when you grip your seat, but the rewards when you get above the clouds are exhilarating.

### Note

- [1] SPIRA – Stanley Park Innovation and Research Academy  
<http://www.stanleyparkhigh.org.uk/79/spira>

### References

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