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## Fly With Me: how Stanley Park High School developed an alternative vision and practice, as told through the narrative of four teachers

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**ABSTRACT** This article introduces texts by practitioners at Stanley Park High School, links these to articles about the school in the previous issue of *FORUM*, and endorses the continuing commitment at Stanley Park to encouraging a thriving learning culture.

It is very rare that a school is brave enough to publicly share its practice, especially when that practice is sufficiently different from the mainstream, and sufficiently coherent in itself, to suggest that another way is not only possible but is being enacted day in and day out. Stanley Park High School, in the south London Borough of Sutton, is such a school. Arguably it is the most innovative and creative state secondary school in the UK right now. Winner of the prestigious *Times Educational Supplement* (TES) Secondary School of the Year award in 2016, it has developed a raft of pioneering innovations over the past decade, each reinforcing its prime aim of 'Igniting a Passion for Learning'. Stanley Park's approach is built around the notion that developing strong and enduring relationships between people is the foundation on which success is fashioned and on which extraordinary things can be made to happen.

Recently in England, Amanda Spielman, HM Chief Inspector of Education, reflected on the initial evidence of a research programme she commissioned to broaden understanding of how curricula are implemented in schools. She wrote: 'Apart from the timetable, there was an absence of other tangible reference points to get to grips with the complex business of curriculum planning ... the most likely explanation [being] that this arises from a weak theoretical understanding of curriculum. This was confirmed by school leaders, who said that there was a time (long ago) when teachers were taught

the theory that underpins curriculum planning. Over time, this competence across the sector ebbed away' (Spielman, 2017). For readers of *FORUM* this statement may both ring true and be utterly lamentable, the 'ebbing away' of which Spielman speaks being a direct result of the State taking control, decimating teacher education and de-professionalising teachers.

The evidence presented in the quartet of articles in this edition of *FORUM* suggests that at Stanley Park at least there is already a counter-revolution – one based on a humanity of scale coupled with a vibrant understanding of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Teachers, as is universally recognised, have huge workload issues, yet their commitment to their work and their passionate contribution to creating an alternative hold such significance that four teachers have reflected on their work and contributed to this edition. Their four articles offer a coherent account and invite us into different aspects of the school and its story of growth.

### **New Forms of Curriculum and Assessment**

The ethos of Stanley Park High School is one of optimism, informed planning and can-do implementation. Nowhere is this more tangible than in the approach of and engagement in the school's Excellence Futures Curriculum (EFC), and in the development of new forms of assessment that honour all learners' talents and see them as equal partners in their own learning. In Katie Alden's article we hear the voice of the student as she engages her audience and shares her work for critical appraisal that radiates warmth as well as rigour. Through discussion, iteration and refinement, the innovative ideas and approaches outlined in these articles have been maturing for a number of years at Stanley Park. Katie Alden's captivating and insightful article 'Creating Independent Learners: placing students at the heart of the assessment process' makes some of them available to a wider audience. Katie's narrative is characterised by a commitment to dialogue, a sense of hope and community, and an understanding of young people's agency built on trust and support so that all are valued and have a voice through which to reflect, talk and share their learning.

Jacquie Thomas locates the curriculum developments at Stanley Park biographically and in relation to the discouraging policy context in which teachers currently work, and the wider dilemmas that context can generate. She reminds us of the world we have lost: 'When I first started teaching I don't think I had ever heard of vocabulary such as "measuring", "tracking", "evidence" and suchlike being acquainted with education', and she asks: 'How could these terms possibly have any connection with the nuanced work of unlocking students' creativity and developing their understanding of the world and their ability to think and work together to decipher the meaning of life as derived from texts?' As an English teacher, Jacquie Thomas travels back through time and recounts the many and varied strategies that would fix the problem and raise so-called standards, just as many to be quickly abandoned. Her comments have strong resonances with the theme of Rebecca Allen's 'Caroline Benn 2017

Memorial Lecture’, particularly in raising the question ‘What is it all for?’ – especially when Allen writes that ‘despite all teachers’ extra work educational standards have not improved since the mid-1990s, according to a recent report from the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM)’ (Allen, 2017). Given this, and through the insight derived from her experience, Jacquie Thomas encourages teachers to be bold and let professional values lead the reform. As she says, ‘true democratic education takes place only if the curriculum model allows it. It is very sad to know that so many school leaders feel bound by the shackles of School Performance Tables.’ She urges schools to create ‘the new’ with their communities and move away from fear. Her article is a fascinating account of the processes of change and the development of the EFC project at Stanley Park High School over a decade.

Both Jacquie Thomas and Katie Alden write of innovation at Key Stage 3. Susan Noble, another teacher of English, writes of the challenges and compromises at Key Stages 4 and 5. ‘Igniting a Passion in English’ is another lucid and perceptive article. Susan Noble, like other contributors, writes of the transformational change over the last decade and, as have Jacquie Thomas and David Taylor, she has been at the school for over a decade. It is interesting to speculate whether the constant dialogue and sharing over the years has been a significant contributory factor in increasing confidence, trust and capacity to take risks, reflect on failures and drive coherent whole-school development forward. The reform of GCSEs has been a particular challenge, making it especially hard, as Susan writes, to ‘maintain our focus on enkindling a passion for English and an awareness of how literature helps us understand our world and history. In order to do this, we have resisted becoming solely driven by targets, by the need to teach for exams, and by regarding students as data for analysis. Instead we are concerned to devise creative ways to engage our students and harness their interest.’ The article gives practical insight into how this has been achieved, what strategies were deployed and where a balance was struck, including over the thorny issue of introducing GCSE in Year 9. Susan always holds fast to the importance of designing ‘a curriculum that provides [young people] with enjoyable experiences while also developing the necessary skills for success in later life (where exams are just one feature)’. Implicit in Susan Noble’s article is the question that both Jacquie Thomas and Katie Alden raise – that of purpose: ‘What is it all for?’ In Susan’s writing there is a challenge to current obsessions with examinations: ‘Our aim for our students is to encourage them to want to pick up another book, not groan in frustration at the prospect of reading.’ On a wider canvas this question of focus and fitness for purpose is emerging as a central theme of current orthodoxy. In an article in the *Guardian* newspaper Diane Reay (2017), arguing that there is a lack of opportunity and recognition of the talents of many working-class students, commented that ‘England does not have an education system that is serious about realising the potential of all children’. Susan Noble’s article has a similar message.

### **At Whose Service?**

The final article is quite different. David Taylor (Taylor, 2017) has already described the organisation of the school into a series of schools-within-schools. Writing now with Alison Bailey, he illuminates how this system has allowed one of the mini schools to be organised differently from the other three, with its two opportunity bases – Aqua and Ignis – meeting the needs of 91 students with an Education and Health Care Plan for Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). The total school population is around 1300, with students equally and randomly divided across the other three schools.

David and Alison's article begins by exposing the impact of 'gaming the system' and jettisoning 'academically marginal' students prior to their final GCSEs in order to boost a school's position in the league tables and ensure targets are exceeded. The writers evidence that the impact of this is especially pernicious to SEND (special educational needs and disability) students. Again, this raises a number of issues, including those of social justice and social mobility. As the Social Mobility Commission recently revealed, '[t]he social mobility agenda has been lamentably unambitious. Its focus on the talented few offers no hope for the many' (Todd, 2017). The message this gives, the lesson of this hidden curriculum, blows out of the water the idea of the school as a place of moral purpose. If it is learned, such a lesson would see the school's work restricted to the servicing of a set of accountability metrics, rather than put to the service of children and their communities.

The bulk of the article by David and Alison focuses on the workings of Aqua and Ignis, the need for protected time, relationships and space, as well as the opportunities a co-located mini school gives for various permutations of integration and support. As with much in the articles contributed by the teachers at Stanley Park, the experience of inclusion and its deepening have intensified over time as confidence has grown through stability and reflection on practice. The authors recall the concerns among some teachers as the Opportunity Bases began, and move to celebrate that '[t]he integration of the two bases has done much to enrich our school community, with benefits being felt by both mainstream and autistic students ... for students leaving the [school], success will be partially represented by grades in [their] examinations, but less evidenced will be the individual journeys they have been on' – a sentiment that chimes well with the aspirations of Susan Noble and her team of teachers of English.

### **Courage and Integrity**

In the previous edition of *FORUM* (59(3)), headteacher David Taylor's article 'Taking Off into a Strong Headwind: creating truly comprehensive, human-scale secondary education against the prevailing gales of performativity' set the scene for 'the journey of reform; one that has rightly challenged the dominant and compliant view, and embraced a progressive tradition of comprehensive education in order to unleash the innate creativity of our students and the

professional capital of our teachers' (Taylor, 2017). In this edition, much more detail is at hand to suggest what that journey is unfolding. What is missing, however, is any real discussion of the courage and integrity of the leadership that spawned the changes and led to pioneering practice that now sees visitors from across the globe flock to the school in increasing numbers, and for repeat visits and discussions about how others may take change forward.

The changes that David Taylor writes of are profound. They represent an alternative way of conceiving the curriculum and enacting it together with connected changes in pedagogy, assessment and the environment of learning. It has been his informed, principled, enabling, careful and at times appropriately cautious leadership, based around trust and investing in teacher development, that, over more than a decade, has made Stanley Park High School a vibrant place for learners of all ages. David Taylor is a very visible and accessible headteacher who has the lived experience and improvement of learning at the heart of his ambition. In this process he has been fortunate to have attracted a very able staff supported by a critically appreciative governing body and more recently its Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) led by its able chair, Jane Pascoe.

What makes Stanley Park High School extraordinary is not simply its vitality and creativity; it is also that the school's values are routinely embedded in the encounters of staff and students – the school is living its beliefs. As an alternative model, however, its characteristics are not unique. Recently, the Welsh government, with the support of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), encouraged a 'thriving learning culture' through the development of 'schools as learning organisations', and identified seven dimensions of a new model:

1. Developing a shared vision centred on the learning of all learners;
2. Creating and supporting continuous learning opportunities for all staff;
3. Promoting team learning and collaboration among all staff;
4. Establishing a culture of enquiry, innovation and exploration;
5. Embedding systems for collecting and exchanging knowledge for learning;
6. Learning with and from the external environment and wider learning system;
7. Modelling and growing learning leadership (Welsh Government, 2017).

This is Stanley Park. Readers of *FORUM* will recognise these dimensions as a welcome reminder of some of the more encouraging ideas from the last century. That they are being restated is yet another example of the wasted years and the dearth of innovation that state control and 'accountability first' have produced. All the more remarkable, then, that Stanley Park High School has thrived in its determination to 'Ignite Passion' and put human flourishing and learning front and centre.

### References

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