

Leadership for inclusion: overcoming barriers to progress **An account of practice in an English secondary school**

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Introduction

The improvement of urban schools is one of the major challenges facing practitioners and policy-makers in many countries. Issues related to poverty create particular difficulties in this respect. In England, the emphasis on market-led improvement strategies has tended to add to these challenges, not least in encouraging the use of strategies for ‘raising standards’ (as measured by aggregate test and examination results) that can result in the marginalisation or, indeed, exclusion of some groups of learners. However, there *are* schools that have succeeded in increasing and sustaining attainment levels over time, whilst at the same time developing positive strategies for responding to student diversity. This paper examines what has happened in one such school in order to learn more about factors that are associated with its success. In particular, the paper explores some of the leadership practices that have been used to move the school forward.

In developing an account of these developments, use was made of the ‘Timeline of Change’, a research technique that analyses how individuals within a school perceive their experience of a particular change over a period of time (Ainscow, Hargreaves and Hopkins (1995). In addition, a group of students in the school participated in a ‘photovoice’ project in which they were asked to photograph ‘welcoming’ and ‘unwelcoming’ places in the school and then use their images to design a poster project. The students’ discussion about their photographs was wide ranging and covered important aspects of the school and its ethos. Their comments and images inform this account.

The school and its context



Hillside is a state Secondary High School that serves a relatively poor district in the town of Moortown, in the North of England. It is reported that approximately a quarter of the local population draw some form of welfare assistance. A senior

member of the staff commented about the local district: 'It feels like a place that has no sense of direction, or future'.

The school building, which is generally shabby and in need of extensive improvements, is located on an attractive site surrounded by fields, which it shares with another secondary school. Previously, when students were selected for different forms of education at the age of eleven, the neighbouring school catered for higher achievers, whilst Hillside was a school for lower achieving students.

Students used their photographic projects to highlight what they saw as some of the worst aspects of decay and vandalism in the school buildings. The photograph below depicts an example of this. After this photo was taken, the damaged ceiling was replaced and students involved in the project did acknowledge that it was students themselves vandalizing the school. This apparent contradiction in which students find the results of vandalism to be unwelcoming and unpleasant, but are sometimes involved with the perpetration of the very vandalism they decry generates a sort of ambivalence, which can seem irresolvable and quickly lead to apathy.



One of the few spaces in the school students have almost entirely to themselves are the toilets, but these are some of students' least favourite spaces as they are often very dirty and constantly vandalized. Students expressed their despair at what they felt was the futility of trying to prevent vandalism of the toilets. For example: 'They're just going to do it anyway, day after day, so there's no point stopping them. It's just going to get worse. The toilets are the main part where you just wouldn't want to go whatsoever.' The school's reaction to this has been to lock the toilets during lesson times, but this response, perhaps necessary in the short term, did not seem to students to be a good long-term solution.



The school's designation as a Business and Enterprise College is part of the Government's efforts to encourage all state secondary schools to develop a specialism. £50,000 was invested from local business partners to support this initiative. Currently, it has just over 900 students in the age range 11 to 16 years. Its percentage of students receiving free school meals (a proxy indicator of economic poverty) is approximately 18%, which is above the national average. The percentage of students whose first language is not English is about 1 %, despite the fact that Moortown has a large minority of families who have Asian heritage.

Moortown itself is pretty town, set at the head of a valley in the folds of pale green hills. As a result it tends to feel rather isolated, even though it is not far from other urban conurbations. It used to be a textile centre and it was this that drew thousands of immigrant workers from Bangladesh and Pakistan in the 1960s. In recent years, however, manufacturing industry has drained away, to be replaced not so much by unemployment as by low-wage jobs in call centres and retail outlets. There is a crisis of empty private houses, many of them derelict. Nevertheless, the town still looks clean and well cared for.

The Asian community is mainly concentrated near to the centre of the town, in terraces of cramped two-up two-down houses. As a result, young people from these families tend to go to particular schools near to their homes. This segregation at the school level is a source of considerable concern in a community within which there has been racial tensions, including riots in recent years. These tensions have been exploited locally by the extremist British National Party (BNP).

With this in mind, the local authority has won funding from national government to demolish all eight of the Moortown secondary schools, including Hillside. These will be replaced by five newly-built schools, located strategically in order to cut across traditional ethnic boundaries. This plan has been opposed by local BNP politicians who argue that the Asians and whites are not polarised enough. One of these politicians was quoted in a national newspaper as saying: 'I think you've got two communities that have got to somehow learn to live separately.'

Given the context of a school which is to be demolished in the not so distant future, devoting time, effort and money towards maintaining and improving the schools structures and grounds may seem somewhat pointless. Nevertheless the school has been investing in improvements. One student explained 'They've changed all the rooms around. It's because we're a college and want to be better than any of the other schools in the area that's why they're changing it around and trying to make it better. They're setting standards for other schools to try and meet.'

School development

Set against this background of social and economical tensions, Hillside is worthy of particular attention in that over a period of some 15 years it has gone from being a poorly performing school, very unpopular in the local community, to one that is seen as achieving good examination results and, as a result, is now over-subscribed. In describing the school's current popularity one student explained 'We had to fight for places... a lot of us did.' The story of what happened in the school can be told in terms of three overlapping phases:

Phase 1: An unpopular school. The headteacher joined the school in 1987, initially as deputy head. He remembers being shocked by what he found in the school. At the time there were about 700 students, about 5% of whom were achieving A* to C grades in GCSE, the school-leaving examination at 16. About a third of the students left with literally no recognised qualifications. He recalled: 'It was an unpopular school, living in the shadow of the former grammar school next door'. Apparently cynicism amongst staff was very noticeable, not least in terms of the way that the local community was characterised in deficit terms. Nevertheless, there was a generally good working atmosphere, with high standards in sport, and with a few students picked out for greater academic attention.

The head remembers feeling something of an 'oddity', in that he was relatively young, optimistic, well qualified and 'from down south'. He recalls colleagues saying, 'You don't understand these kids'. Nevertheless, he was able to work with some staff to improve the school's image and its examination results. Indeed, he recalls a sense of strategic dilemma in respect to how far attention should be focused on internal improvement, whilst, at the same time trying to improve the school's reputation in the local community. The improvements during this period were very patchy because heads of subject departments had considerable autonomy. Nevertheless, by 1994 19% of students received A* to C grades in the GCSE.

Phase 2: Turning the school round. The previous headteacher retired in 1994 and the deputy was promoted into the post. He recalls vividly a meeting of parents of prospective students during that year, at which he explained what the school was good at and how he was introducing new measures to improve examination results. Amazingly, Hillside went from being under-subscribed to being the most popular secondary school in the town within that year. Reflecting on all of this, he feels that a number of factors were at work, including the fact that he had become well known locally for his work as deputy, the school's record in sport, and the fact that he spoke openly and frankly about the changes he was making. He also thinks that there was an element of luck in what happened.

Meanwhile, the new head set about introducing major changes within the school. He paid an external management consultant to review the situation and work with stakeholders to generate a development plan. Emphasis was placed on staff and governor involvement, using the external facilitator to help generate priorities for action. The head recalls that the facilitator kept 'taking us back to values'. Staff were then formed into working groups to work on key issues. These were not always 'cozy conversations' apparently. The head remembers some staff asking, 'how are you going to get us better kids to teach?'

Previously management arrangements in the school had been rather weak, with plans written to impress inspectors but in a way that had little or no relevance to practitioners in the school. The plans that emerged from the new consultative approach seemed much more 'business-like', not least the emphasis placed on target setting. Apparently targets were set for many things, including staff absences and the numbers of times the school was mentioned in the local newspaper. Inevitably there was also a focus on targets for improving examination result. The head recalls: I said to staff, let's be brave: 22% next year, 25% for the following year, and 30% the year

after'. In fact by 1996 the A* to C results had risen to 32% and there was also a reduction in the proportion of students leaving with no qualifications, although this improvement was not so dramatic. Clearly, the approach to school improvement at that stage was not particularly inclusive. Faced by the need to push the school's reputation forward, a deliberate decision was made to concentrate attention on those groups of students who seemed likely to make a significant contribution to the improvement of examination results. The head recalls, 'We threw everything at the borderline kids'.

Almost over night the school came to be seen locally and nationally as a success case. In the political context of a new Labour government that was committed to 'raising standards', particularly in economically poor communities, schools like Hillside that were seen to have made rapid progress, and headteachers who had 'turned such schools round', were the flavour of the moment. The head remembered: 'The great and good were suddenly visiting us to try to find out what had happened'. A national document produced by Ofsted, the national inspection agency, used Hillside as an example of good practice. As a result, the head found himself invited to speak at various national conferences: 'I was saying things that related to the new Labour agenda... that target setting was the way to raise standards'.

Looking back, however, the head now recognises how his experiences in the school became simplified and distorted in the telling. The key to what had happened, he argues, was the emphasis on participation and collective decision-making. This was the social process that had made the idea of working to achieve targets a powerful lever for change. In other words, his strategy had, in practice, been an inclusive one.

The pervasiveness of the school's success story has become almost a sort of mythology which has been influential in shaping people's understandings of the school's past and present. This point is illustrated by a contradiction between staffs' and students' understandings of the school's reputation in the past. Whilst staff who've been at the school long enough remember a school which was 'unpopular' and ill considered in the community, some students believe the school was popular even when their parents were attending 'It's always been good this school, so parents are thinking when they went to this school it was good so they want their children to go to this school.'

Phase 3: Taking an inclusive turn? In 1997 the school was inspected and received a good report. The period that followed was characterised by a lot of reflection and rethinking. In particular, the head recalls how he and his senior colleagues reflected, 'Yes, we have improved results, but not really improved teaching and learning'. His account of this period also seems to suggest what might be described as 'an inclusive turn' in relation to his strategic thinking about the school. For example, he remembers some questions that troubled him at the time, such as: Why is there still such poor attendance? Why is there still student disaffection? Why do some students leave with no qualifications?

As a result, the improvement strategy was rethought with an emphasis on teaching and learning. With external pressure from Government on the issue of inclusion, greater use was made of data to pinpoint groups of learners at risk and areas of policy

and practice that needed attention. One senior member of staff explained, 'Our school uses data a lot and there is still a big emphasis on target setting'. The story is, then, of a school that has learnt to use inquiry-based approaches for fostering developments in teaching and leadership in relation to all students. Copland (2003) suggests that inquiry can be the 'engine' to enable the distribution of leadership, and the 'glue' that can bind a school community together around a common purpose. However, turning these successes into processes that make a deeper and more sustainable impact on the culture of schools is much more difficult. This necessitates longer-term, persistent strategies for capacity building at the school level. It also requires new thinking and, indeed, new relationships at the systems level. In other words, efforts to foster inclusive school improvement are more likely to be effective when they are part of a wider strategy.

Certainly, the evidence is that the recent improvement strategy at Moorside has been successful in bringing about deeper cultural change within the school community, focusing specifically on the need to confront and change residual deficit thinking amongst staff. Perhaps as a result, the improvements in outcomes have continued, such that, by 2003, 98% of students left the school with qualifications and the proportion gaining five A* to C grades had risen to 44%.

Reflecting on what has happened, one senior teacher commented on how well the school is now regarded locally 'for making silk purses out of sow's ears'. The approach is now, he explained, 'improvement for all'. He described how the range of students in the school had changed as numbers had increased, and that 'all kids are valued equally'. So, for example, during one school year the priority was to address underachievement amongst boys. In addition, a learning support centre was been established that provides a flexible range of responses to students experiencing periods of personal crisis. At the same time, he explained, thinking in the school had changed fundamentally: 'They're not problem children, they're children with problems'.

The current situation

In the summer of 2004 the headteacher was appointed to a similar post in another school, leaving his deputy as acting head for the period up to the closure of the school. She and the heads of the other seven schools are closely involved in the planning of the five new schools, which are all due to open in 2006 (in the existing buildings). She commented: 'They're talking about establishing the new schools without buildings.' With this in mind, during the next twelve months designate headteachers will be appointed. This means that the existing heads face considerable uncertainties, not least in terms of their own futures. Meanwhile, they carry a moral responsibility to ensure that the current students and staff are provided with the best possible environments for doing their work.

At Moorside the acting head faces additional challenges in this respect. One senior teacher commented: 'The head leaving has not helped. It has knocked people for six. People are still very keen but they are worried about the future. They don't know how they will be protected. They just see the school disappearing'. Another senior teacher referred to 'a sense of bereavement'. All of this raises questions about the issues of sustainability. In other words, how far are deep changes of the sort that have

occurred at Hillside dependent upon the continued presence of one charismatic leader?

The acting head has taken on this challenge by drawing her senior management team together to share responsibility for steering the school through this difficult period. One member of the team commented: 'We're not going to tread water'. In this context, the recent history of a school staff that has had enormous success in managing change during very difficult times is surely a reason to remain optimistic.

Student perspectives

One important measure of a school's success, are the perspectives of its students. They made many positive comments about the school and its inclusiveness, but highlighted several things they felt made the school a 'less welcoming' place. For example, students pointed out some inconsistencies in the school's application of its rules. There was a sense that the best and worst students were exempt from certain rules, leaving those in the middle, sometimes feeling unfairly penalized. One student explained 'If you're a good student you get away with a lot more, but if you're a bad student you can't get away with nothing.' Another elaborated 'But if you're really bad you can get away with things because the teachers can't be bothered to keep telling you.'

The notion of equity and the importance of having their own spaces/places in the school were important to students and they illustrated this by contrasting the staff room, which they understood to be a special place, only for staff, to the student's toilets which they saw as being one of the equivalent places for students. The students understood this to be a somewhat overdramatic distinction, but used it to highlight the point. They expressed the desire for different sort of space for older students in the school, one student saying: 'We thought if there's a staff room there should be a year 11 room...there is the dining room, but it's not one of the most relaxing places to sit down.'



Students also felt it was difficult to outlive a poor reputation in the school, even if one had changed one's behaviour and academic performance. One student gave a personal

Concluding remarks

It is important to note that this account is very partial, using the perspectives of a small number of senior staff and a group of older students. We are conscious that much more time and resources would be needed in order to develop a fuller more authentic representation of the school's history. Nevertheless, the account does provide an illustration of the strategies used to make this school more inclusive. In so doing, it also draws attention to some of the contradictions in English education policies.

References

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