

# Successful leadership for promoting the achievement of white working class pupils

## **Vignettes**

Twelve accounts of school life

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**November 2008**

SCHOOL LEADERS

Vignettes

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# 1. Introduction

Vignettes, the dictionary says, are character sketches, word pictures, and derive from small designs of vine leaves used to embellish the covers and opening pages of books. Our attempt to describe the work of the schools we visited in this research project will do as little justice to its quality and the consequent outcomes as a drawing of vine leaves would to the beauty of great vineyards still less the warmth and texture of the resulting wine. We hope though that by celebrating the leadership we observed and heard about, we can all begin to understand and describe it in ways that make it accessible and replicable.

This is one of three products from a research project commissioned jointly by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The research has its roots in a growing national concern about the low attainment levels reached by young people from low-income backgrounds who are described as white British in surveys recording ethnic background. A second product is the main research report describing the character and characteristics of the school leaders, mainly headteachers, whose schools we visited and whose colleagues and pupils we interviewed. The third product is a literature review (for which the support of Janet Friedlander, Head of Information at the NUT, was invaluable) which reports the evidence of extensive and persistent low attainment for that group.

In the introduction to the main report we write that the best of school leadership raises the work of adults and the attainment of young people to levels that exceed expectations and, sometimes, even their own ambitions. It combines relentless focus and management skill with wide professional knowledge and profound empathy, wrapped in a bag of energy and tied with robust optimism. It has its most remarkable expression in circumstances where poverty and culture might otherwise corrode the potential of young people to fulfil their talent.

These vignettes celebrate some of that leadership by trying to capture the considerable achievements of the leadership, staff and students. Several of the headteachers have complemented us on how close we are to capturing the essence of what they are trying to do. We can only note that they had already done the hard work and created the stories we could tell.

**Denis Mongon**  
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# Bartley Green

## Context

Bartley Green School (BGS) is located on the western edge of Birmingham in one of the 10 per cent most deprived wards within the city. The housing stock includes a significant proportion of low rise social housing and the area suffers from significant socio-economic disadvantage, poor health indicators and low levels of education which have resulted in limited employment and economic opportunities, generally aspirations within the community are low. Thirty six percent of Bartley Green's students are entitled to free school meals and most would be considered working class. Ten percent of students have statements for special educational needs and 26 per cent are on the SEN register. The vast majority of students (88 per cent) are white although this figure has declined over the past few years as other ethnic groups have moved into the area. Boys outnumber girls, 60 per cent of students on roll are male and the school reports that many of the pupils have not visited the countryside, an art gallery or even been into the Birmingham city centre.

BGS is a mixed 11 to 16 comprehensive school with 880 pupils on roll. The school has gained specialist status in technology and sport and is exploring the possibility of gaining trust status. This move is an attempt to support the continued development of the school and in part, a response to the creation of two new academies within the locality. The school holds numerous external awards and titles including: Investors In People (fourth re-accreditation) Financial Management Standard (2007), Healthy Schools (2006-7), maths and PE lead department for the local authority and SSAT Consultant School (advanced level). The most recent Ofsted inspection in 2008 judged the school as 'outstanding'. The current headteacher was promoted from deputy head of another school in the area and has led 13 years of continuous improvement in pupils' achievement and attainment. In 1994, only 9 per cent of students left with five good GCSEs (A\*-C) compared to 77 per cent in 2007 (48 per cent including English and maths). In 2007, BGS's CVA was 1079, the second highest in England.

## Community and culture

As a school community, BGS places high value on symbolism. The buildings are not new, rather they are pretty 'bog standard' and unremarkable 20th century school buildings, however, what goes on inside them is far from ordinary. Displays of students' work make an immediate positive impact on anyone entering the school. The displays are diverse, engaging and fresh, they celebrate success. Where possible, the buildings and facilities have been adapted to meet the needs of the students. For example, the students played an important role in getting air conditioning put into 'hot and stuffy' ICT rooms and transforming a once dreary quadrangle into a covered area for outside dining and recreation including a dedicated table tennis area. Climbing holds have been bolted onto the outside of the sports hall providing a 'rock climbing' traversing course around the building. What once was an area frequented by students hiding for a smoke is now a hive of positive activity. A putting green has also been created and students spend time practicing their golf. Even five years ago table tennis, climbing and golf were not the sort of sports that BGS students would have considered or have been keen to participate in. One senior manager reflected: "We try to provide them [student] with activities that they will enjoy. In the past when they had little to do, that's when we had trouble, especially at lunchtimes."

The general décor is bright and feels optimistic, there is a sense this is a good place to be, teachers are visible on the corridors, they exude confidence, they are friendly but maintain an appropriate distance from students. Overall, one is struck by the attention to detail in all areas whether it is the quality of displays, the professionalism of staff photographs, photographs of recent extra-curricular activities or a member of staff picking up on a student not wearing their uniform correctly. The school is underpinned by a tight set of values which demand that all can achieve. There are clearly defined boundaries in all areas from behaviour to acceptable uniform to academic progress. These are maintained by the consistent application of rewards and sanction across the school. Consistency of approach by adults in the school is viewed as an important element for success.

The 'discipline for learning system' relies on points being assigned and recorded to particular behaviours, resulting in specific sanctions. This system has been in place for over a decade and is an example of how the school has taken a principle and after developing a system to meet the needs of the staff and students, and then, by monitoring and evaluation, refined the structures and processes of the system to evolve in sympathy with the school's development.

Attention to detail and the use of data are not limited to behavioural issues. Quality data systems are in place to inform decision making across all areas of the school. For example, student mentoring involves early identification and intervention by senior management to ensure students keep on track to meet their academic targets. Systematic recording of individual's attitude, progress and performance is shared across curriculum areas. This process highlights general trends and subject specific issues which can be triangulated with other datasets to monitor performance.

The school is dedicated to issues of inclusion and raising the aspirations of students. The school allocates an annual budget of £45,000 to subsidise educational visits to promote enrichment activities for all students. On average each student goes on at least four trips per year. In 2004, an analysis of the impact of this subsidy concluded that the cheaper the trips were the more students on free school meals participated. The school has now invested in a software package to monitor this more closely. Recent trips have included a Year 8 residential trip to Wales (£15) and free trips to places of worship, Birmingham Museum, Art Gallery and Ikon Gallery and a free Design Technology trip to Ironbridge. The school is focused on providing the highest quality teaching and learning experiences but as our senior leader articulated: "Our job is education although we provide a much broader service." The collective view of staff at BGS is that education is a mechanism which can improve the student's life chances and that it is the school's role to support their students to the highest degree possible in order for them to perform beyond expectations and achieve the highest possible academic standards.

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

Leadership of the school was judged as 'outstanding' in the 2008 Ofsted inspection. The headteacher is highly motivated, tenacious and presents as the leading professional. The head models the behaviour and standards expected by staff and students in all areas from lesson preparation and teaching low ability students, report writing to chairing governors meetings and liaising with external agencies or policy makers. Her expectations are extremely high and non-negotiable. Staff and students at BGS are expected to go beyond the 'extra mile'. This was recognised by all levels of staff interviewed. A member of SMT reflected:

"I think it is her leadership of clear expectations and high expectations. She will back people up and support staff but on the other hand she'll pull people up and say 'no, that's not good enough'... There are high expectations of staff as well as kids. We've got to be role models."

Another teacher commented: "She sets them [high expectations] herself and certainly demands them from staff."

The whole school community is expected to meet these expectations in all aspects of their work and there are strong lines of accountability and are mechanisms in place to monitor individual and team performance, so when expectations are not being met or things are not being done as they should, early identification is possible. This ensures expectations do not slip and underperformance can be challenged early. Where appropriate, genuine attempts are made to support individuals who find it difficult to meet expectations and in most cases the situation can be rectified. However, if individuals fail to respond to support mechanisms or cannot raise their game to the expected level, they tend to move to another post elsewhere.

Clearly, the head is a very talented leader and manager who has been able to shift the school culture and performance over a prolonged period, however, it would be wrong to suggest this is a case of 'heroic leadership' where the head has dragged the school by herself in the face of adversity. In the early days there may have been some merit in this argument, at least in the sense of establishing a vision and modelling a work ethic but this approach would not have been sustainable in the longer term. The school's sustained development is underpinned by the quality of staff that have been systematically recruited and retained within the organisation. Therefore, there are talented leaders and managers with complementary skill sets at every level within the school. For example, within the senior management team there is pastoral deputy who lives in the community and has taught up to three generations of children. He is perceived as 'tough but fair' or in the words of a student "sound". If there is an issue in the school or community it is likely he can diffuse the situation or has a contact that he can draw on to bring the matter to a positive conclusion. There is also a former head of science that has become an expert on the use of data. There are other members who are considered 'experts' in areas such as pedagogy who have risen into senior positions relatively quickly. However, despite the mix of characters, time in post and range of expertise, roles and responsibilities have not become segregated. There is a sense of coherence and an understanding of the relationship between pastoral care and academic achievement and how this plays out in the community the school serves. One member of senior management reported team meetings as being "intellectually stimulating, highly pressured and very focused". A recent development is the appointment of a school business manager. The head views this as a crucial development, freeing up time of senior managers and teachers to "lead learning" rather than getting bogged down in administration and business development. As the business manager stated: "I'm responsible for everything that is not teaching and learning." All staff interviewed spoke of their deep commitment to doing the best for the children they serve and a recognition that this can only be done when all the 'cogs' fit together and work in harmony. This is achieved by the vision and expectations being very clearly articulated so there is no doubt about what is expected in terms of individual or team contributions. One NQT reflected "everyone knows what they are doing, it is very clear" and went on to add that it was not an easy option teaching at BGS but it was very rewarding because you could see that you were making a difference to the students you taught.

Three major factors are contributing to Bartley Green's placing since 2004 the school in the top 1 per cent nationally for contextual value added measures.

First, is the investment in staff development, teachers are expected to reflect on and develop their practice and the senior leadership team value and support professional development linking it directly into the school development plan. The Investors in People report (2007) concluded:

'Improving teaching and learning through staff development is an integral part of the school development plan and given highest priority. This means the links between targets and standard to be achieved and the staff development needed to achieve them are absolutely clear with a single document.'

The second element is the approach to recruitment and retention. The recruitment process is thorough and challenging. Only the best teachers and potential leaders are recruited to BGS. The unspoken policy is to not-appoint rather than appoint a teacher who is not considered to meet expectations. For a school like BGS this is a difficult but important principle to maintain but over time this has contributed to improved levels of staff competency and also improved teachers' sense of worth and self-esteem within the school. In addition to a rigorous recruitment process the senior team are outward looking, with established professional networks. These networks are often used to identify potential members of staff. Finally, where possible, excellence is rewarded and therefore retained through promotion. Where there is room for improvement professional development opportunities exist to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The third important contributing element is curriculum development. The curriculum has been tailored to meet individual students needs so the curriculum is now stage not age related. In 2007, the top set Year 8 took SATs one year early (45 per cent level 5 and 52 per cent level 6). These pupils are now studying GCSE maths in Years 9-10 with AS level planned for Year 11. This is also the case for design technology where four Year 10 pupils were entered and gained a good GCSE in Year 10 (food technology) and are now studying for an AS in Year 11. The diverse range of pathways available for different students means that they can experience success rather than failure early on in their secondary school careers. This can lead to increased self confidence and act as a route to achieving further successes creating an upward spiral of achievement.

## **People and relationships**

On one hand the continued success of the school does not seem reliant on 'headteacher leadership'; the investment made by the headteacher in developing individuals and teams over a prolonged period (in educational terms) has created high leadership capacity across the school. However, on the other hand, as one teacher put it: "Distributed leadership is not enough you need experience and a good headteacher." BGS is in the fortunate position of having experience, a good headteacher and high leadership capacity across the school. It would seem the success of the school is at least in part, due to the combination of these factors coming together.

In conclusion, this vignette ends as it begins not by drawing attention to the fabric but by focusing on the symbolic. BGS is all about putting the students first, placing them at the centre of every action, wanting the best for them and supporting them to achieve it. In one sense, by providing a wide range of opportunities and raising expectations and aspirations the school acts as compensator for the external environment. One explanation for the commitment and tenacity needed to achieve this may be found in the staff themselves and their relationships with each other and the students. Irrespective of how they arrived at the school, first and foremost these people want to work in a school in challenging circumstances. The best teachers and school leaders do not end up in these schools by accident. As one member of senior management reflected: "It is a very conscious decision to work in this type of school." Some have a strong affinity for the type of children and come from very similar or even more challenging backgrounds while others do not. Either way there is a strong sense of self-efficacy and social justice. These teachers and leaders know they can and do make a difference to the life chances of their students.

# Bishopsgarth

## Context

Bishopsgarth Specialist Mathematics and Computing College is situated in a deceptively rural location on the very western edge of Stockton on Tees. The school is surrounded on three sides by farmland and a determined rambler could walk due west into the north Pennines and eventually the Lake District with little hindrance. The locality served by the school is in the opposite direction, east across a main road and into the Hardwick estate created fifty or so years ago to provide new council homes for the families of mainly industrial workers on Teesside.

With just under five hundred students, boys and girls aged 11–16, Bishopsgarth is about half the size of an average secondary school in England. Thirty five percent of the students are eligible for free school meals, about two and a half times the national average. More than a third of the students are on the SEN register including the 9.5 per cent who have statements of special educational need. The school has a 40-place base for pupils with physical and medical needs while an increasing number of pupils with statements for mild learning difficulties are also drawn to the school by its inclusive reputation. The overwhelming majority, 97.7 per cent, of students at Bishopsgarth are of white British origin. Less than two percent of the students have a first language which is not English.

The community served by the school has high levels of socio-economic deprivation. Nearby Hardwick is the most deprived ward in Stockton and 365th out of 8414 wards nationally on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. It is the bottom percentile for child poverty. The proportions of lone parents (17 per cent), unemployment benefit claimants (19 per cent) and households without a car (53 per cent) are all at or very close to double the national averages. 57 per cent of the students' parents have no further education qualifications. Pupil attainment at the school stands out dramatically from the other social data in this locality by closing in on or matching national achievements. The school does even better than matching in terms of CVA where its 2007 score of 1032 places it around the top ten percent nationally. The CVA score was created by 54 per cent of the students achieving 5A\*–C passes, 32 per cent including English and maths. The school's most recent Ofsted inspection, in 2007, concluded that overall it is a good school with outstanding features. Bishopsgarth has been awarded the Healthy Schools Gold Award, Bronze Artsmark and the national 'Respect' award. On leaving school, about 35 per cent of students go on to Sixth Form College, 40 per cent to the local further education college and 20 per cent directly into employment.

## Community and culture

Building on the strengths of the local community and its culture while rising above the challenges is a pre-occupation for everyone who works at Bishopsgarth. "It is actually quite a challenging school. It takes a year to settle in if you are a new teacher. The parents don't have unreasonable expectations, but they do expect you to educate their children. If you do that, then they will trust you and support you." (Head)

The headteacher returns to the themes of persistence and consistency in this context repeatedly. He has worked at the school for 18 years and members of the senior leadership team average more than ten years service at the school. His own background might offer an insight into his commitment: "I've always been attracted to schools like this. I went to a similar school, similar size, virtues and challenges in the East End of London." (Head)

The risks of stability and continuity are readily acknowledged and weighed against the enormous advantages the school leadership and staff believes they bring: "There are personal, career disadvantages for people if they choose to stay in one school and there's always a risk of repeating something second rate, or being smug or complacent. With our professional accountabilities and a challenging group of students, we can avoid that trap. On the other hand consistency means a lot to our students and their families. Everyone knows where they are year in and out, the students and their parents know what to expect: the school's rules and expectations and people they know. Our events now, a school play or an options night, are sell outs." (Head)



“We’re the only stable thing students have in some circumstances. They do respond to consistency and if you look at our staff through the school and it is a very stable staff, some of us have been here for hundreds of year. You need that experience with a good balance of new, young teachers coming through so the students feel trust and consistency and know what they are buying into.” (Teachers)

There is a home-school contract and the school also actively recruits people from the Hardwick to work in every available role including teaching, family support and school administration. “The headteacher has a particular idea about what he wants, I think he likes to say there are lots of former pupils, like me, working here, he likes that as role models. And my mum still works on the estate which is a great way of checking out what’s being said about us.” (Teacher)

Appearance, school and students, is an important part of Bishopsgarth’s presentation of itself to its community. “The thing is that the students think that this is what a secondary school is like. They’d be astonished if they went to some of the places I’ve worked. Here there are carpets on the floor and work on the walls. I’ve been in schools where stuff would not stay on the wall if you screwed it on. When I first visited I thought the place looked good and felt friendly, more like a primary school actually.” (Teacher)

School uniform is another example of how the school manages the line between high standards and acknowledgement of the community’s difficulties. “We want the highest standards for all pupils, so uniform is important. Our pupils can be recognised as Bishopsgarth and take a pride in their appearance and in their school. But be realistic, it costs to dress a young person, so the uniform has to be simple, practical and relatively inexpensive. Basically, we’ve gone for a logo on black polo shirts, black sweatshirts and black skirt or trousers. It works for us.” (School Leader)

‘Staff work tirelessly’ is Ofsted’s phrase to describe the wide range of opportunities outside the classroom and school day created to widen students’ horizons and experiences. Clubs, sports activities, musical and drama productions, visits and residential trips are based on the principle that if you are a well behaved student on the roll you are entitled to join in; no disability or economic barriers are allowed to interfere. A 2007 production of Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat involved every Year 7 student in a creative and socially inclusive endeavour. ‘It is hard,’ Ofsted reports, ‘to see how more could be offered’.

The school has been co-sponsor of a community liaison group, looking originally at the behaviour of pupils in the community. The group’s meetings are held at the school and it now works with councillors, the police and others to effect improvements around the locality. The school has staff representation on the board of the Hardwick Community Partnership, a local regeneration project and as a specialist school it encourages the use of school facilities to support parents helping their children and learning themselves.

Continuously and consistently the leadership and staff at Bishopsgarth keep an eye on the horizons. “We never think ‘kids like this’. We know where they come from, we know that already, the point is to move forward.” (Teacher)

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

“A good leader has his head in the game, knows what he’s about.” (Student)

Bishopsgarth’s commitment to high quality teaching and learning is an unequivocal response to the analyses which show that more than two thirds of pupils in any Year 7 group have arrived with a reading age below their chronological age. “Our central aim is to get children their exam qualifications. It can seem tedious and narrow because Key Stage grades are a limited view of what schools are about but that is our first task... and if the grades are ok, you can start to do more.” (Head)

The school year at Bishopsgarth, including for most students transfer into Year 7, starts in June. This means Year 7 is up and running long before September and the teaching time in Year 11 is increased by 25 per cent from two to two and a half terms.

The school uses setting as the basis for its class organisation and tracks student development methodically. There is a school-wide approach to coaching and supporting reading and writing as core skills. Students with poor literacy are given intensive reading support. The school's mathematics and computing specialism, for which the teaching and learning was judged outstanding, drives another core skill development. Extra classes, open to every student, are run each term and effectively add a lesson to the day for pupils studying for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 exams.

"We use the data really carefully and track the students very carefully, always asking how we can move students across the margin, over the next bar." (Teacher)

"Our students have the skills and could succeed, but they lack ambition, and in a small school, the staff can react to that in a personalised way, encouraging them." (Teacher)

"We are relentless in our pursuit of outcomes at the end of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4; we do a lot of intervention work. We will not give up or let go and they do appreciate it. We are the banes of their life but they do appreciate it." (Teacher)

The school is adept at engaging with national initiatives to create funding streams for its core work and for partnerships with local primary schools. Its students have benefited from initiatives such as Leading Edge, Education Action Zone, Excellence in Cities, and the Behaviour Improvement Programme. The head makes a point of referring to the school's bursar and how invaluable that role has been to good budget management.

The adults at Bishopsgarth are absolutely at one in their belief that good quality teaching and learning are dependent on appropriate student behaviour which is in various parts managed, sponsored and modelled. Assertive discipline with its emphasis on clear rules, positive reinforcement and consistent reactions is the core approach across the school. When behaviour difficulties do move to the margins of tolerable, the interventions of the learning support unit are described by Ofsted as 'outstanding'.

Students at Bishopsgarth, who are very used to self-evaluation and peer assessment, understand and support the approaches their teachers are taking:

"If you see the teachers at Tesco, they speak to you, ask if you're alright, friendly like. In school, it's a really fine line between being soft and they know when to say no. You know when to stop, and if you go too far, you have to make amends but that's it they don't carry it on in the next lesson..."

"They don't say, 'you must do this'; they say, 'you must do as good as you can. They expect you to do it as hard as you can and if you can't they'll try to improve it with you. They don't expect A grades, they expect you to do as best as you can."

"If you don't work to a standard, they take you out and say, 'this is what you could be achieving, this is what you need to do and this is what you're not doing."

Pupils in Key Stage 4 have a learning mentor who advises on career and college options and 'what they have to do at school and home in order to pass exams'. A Connexions adviser is also based in school to help with careers. Curriculum breadth is added in at the same time through a partnership with Stockton Riverside College. This partnership between secondary and further education offers options and vocational courses to meet the needs of all the students and a bridge for many of them into continuing education. The curriculum for each year starts in June, not in September, making the most of the time available and for Year 7; this has necessitated a close and successful collaboration with primary schools. The students themselves say that this was a good way to start.

Staff recruitment, retention and development are high on the leadership's radar. When the headteacher first came to the school as a deputy, it was still seen as a place to which the local authority could redeploy staff who could not be accommodated anywhere else. His approach is described very differently by his colleagues now:

“He employs the right people, makes sure they are heading in the right direction and ensures consistency.”

“Sometimes you’d not know he was there, taking everything in, speaking quietly, but you know he is in complete control and though he seems laid back, he has a steeliness, a determination, imperceptible sometimes...”

“The leadership trust us implicitly. Being here a long time doesn’t stop you developing, they’ve supported 100 per cent every professional development opportunity I’ve wanted. The grass is green here, there’s no need to look anywhere else. The leadership support goes right to the end, quietly determined.”

“You are held accountable and so long as you can explain what you are trying to do, there’s no blame culture; we learn and make changes.”

A student just at the end of Year 9 confirms just how worthwhile the effort is:

“I feel really lucky. From being in like the lowest group in the world at primary school, I mean the lowest group, in the world, I’m into maths and English now, I can aim for something I can get.”

## **People and relationships**

Relationships are at the heart of what the leadership at Bishopsgarth is trying to achieve:

“When I first came, there were fifth years, girls and boys being belittled. You can’t do that and expect loyalty. You have to lay down the ground rules and be persistent on them. Sometimes it even goes against your own nature. But once the students know the rules and that you are going to be fair, that’s what they want.” (Head)

Care, concern and respect for the students are themes for all the adults too. Teachers comment: “It’s about subtle things. We do try to work out all the different things so that like with your own parents, it might just be a change in the tone of voice and you know and they know, what you’re saying.”

“The students need to know that you care about them and you need to tell them when it comes down to that. A lot of them don’t have parents who can be the adults; they’re just older versions of them, going around in circles. There might no-one to give the advice and set the boundaries, about homework, bedtime, fast food or anything. We just have to be in there.”

The Ofsted report confirmed how the staff act as excellent role models in showing respect and concern for students and how, in turn, students show respect for staff and each other. Students are very appreciative of their concern.

“School helps with things like when my brother went out on tour in Afghanistan, and the teachers went out of their way to ask about that, how was he how was I, down because a mate of his was killed; they pick you up.” (Student)

“If you come into school sad and that, they’ll notice or if you come into school in a grump mood, they notice it well. They’ll take you to one side, right throughout the school. They’re helpful.” (Student)

The school council, which meets formally three times per term, allows students to take responsibility and one of our student interviewees, asked to say who the leaders were in the school, included its members: “School Council members are great school leaders; I’d like to be vice chair next year.” (Year 10 Student)

These are relationships which run deep in the school and across into the community: “When [named teacher] retired there were florists vans turning up for weeks.”

# Cardinal Hume

## Context

Cardinal Hume Voluntary Aided Roman Catholic School became a specialist mathematics and computing college in February 2006. In 2007, it moved from 'dilapidated buildings' into a £24 million state of the art school which can accommodate up to 1,200 students, girls and boys. The new building is a greenfield site on the southern edge of Gateshead serving communities largely created by council housing built in the mid twentieth century to accommodate slum clearance from the area's industrial and coal-mining communities. The school has been undersubscribed but is now approaching capacity and has about 120 students in the sixth form. Until moving, the school had been part of a federation with a local Catholic School. The new building, a tribute to modern technology and design, is now unsurprisingly an essential part of the school's narrative about itself. However, the concrete, glass and wifi had made no direct contribution to the attainments and reputation which drew it to our attention, those are better explained in the following paragraphs.

In 2006, Ofsted reported that a large proportion of learners start at the school with results that are below average, many from deprived areas. The number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is average and 'there are fewer pupils than normally found without English as their first language or from minority ethnic groups'. The school had improved considerably over the previous four years and Ofsted attributed much of that to 'highly effective leadership and management'. GCSE results have been improving steadily: in 2001, 21 per cent of the students gained 5A\*-C and in 2008 that had risen to 97 per cent, of whom 43 per cent gained 5A\*-C including English and maths. Students told Ofsted that they feel safe and enjoy being in school, confident that any incidents of bullying are dealt with effectively. The impressive 2007 and 2008 results were achieved by students who spent most or all of their secondary career in the 'dilapidated' old building. They came to the school when its reputation was poor and it was not a school of first choice allocations.

The pastoral system is built around four houses, each with a Head of House and each teacher has pastoral responsibility for a group of around 30 students. The school uses a system called PRAISE, awarding students merits for academic and social achievement against a background of inter-house competition. The academic system is built around an exploratory 'diagnostic' banding system in Year 7 followed by banding according to ability in Years 8 and 9. After the Key Stage 3 assessments, Years 10 and 11 are identified as a two-year programme of study leading to Key Stage 4, assessed through the GCSE or Vocational examinations in the summer term of Year Eleven.

The current headteacher joined the senior leadership of the school in 1999 and was the acting headteacher before becoming the substantive headteacher two years ago. In the early years of this decade, poor results and falling rolls caused the local authority to think seriously about proposing closure for the school. The current headteacher, then acting, resolved to work in federation with a more experienced local headteacher to 'rebrand' the school, substance and image.

## Community and culture

Cardinal Hume is a Roman Catholic secondary school and its faith is a deeply significant feature of its culture and work. It serves a community whose industrial economy has literally rusted away and where unemployment is high. The school's past reputation is said to have dissuaded some parents whose faith entitled their children to a place from applying and it is large enough to admit pupils from the immediately local primary schools even if their parents are not practicing Roman Catholics. About thirty percent of the students are entitled to free school meals and on the Acorn categories produced for the school by Gateshead Council, four out of five of the students are said to come from 'hard-pressed' families, many with only one parent living at home. Fewer than 4 per cent of the students are described as 'ethnic minority'. In 2006-07 there were six permanent exclusions from the school.

Most of the senior and middle leaders, when asked about their own background and the reasons why they came to work at Cardinal Hume, refer to its faith connections. Most also refer to the attractions (as they describe them) of working with young people from a challenging background and the opportunity 'to make a difference'. Many refer to their own background in similar communities. This sense of connection and commitment emerges in different forms; some leaders, including the headteacher, spoke about growing up in the north east and wanting to put something back into the community, others were incomers from similar communities. Several spoke about their experiences in 'more privileged' schools which had been far less fulfilling and prompted them to look for somewhere 'to make a difference'.

These thoughts were summarised by one leader: "People aren't identified here because of their background, they're identified on their ability and potential but people who come from working class backgrounds who do make a difference, have got a zest and an understanding of the characters that they're dealing with.... I think if you've mixed with those sorts of groups over a course of a few years, then you understand what's expected. I learnt more from working on the bins about how people tick than I ever learnt at teacher training college and it certainly toughened me up and I think things like that, a range of experiences, all add to help you do your job better, you know understanding people (...) everything's about people really..."

Another added: "When we're working hard we are working hard knowing that people have had to work hard in far more difficult circumstances... We know there's hard work and hard work, I don't have to go down a coal mine – and so we don't complain about things and we don't kind of just step back and say oh well our role is not to get our hands dirty..."

The student's life outside school and the influence of their family is an important factor for the school leaders who tread a fine line to maintain high standards and without neglecting tolerance in a challenging environment.

"There are some of our kids who have terrible home situations... a deprived area...there are a lot of families who live in difficult circumstances, that's not an excuse to swear at a teacher, there are basic rules that are common good manners... If he swore at a member of staff personally then that's unacceptable. If he swore in the course of a conversation, that's different and we would treat it differently in school. We have a school social worker who works full time, we have nurses on-site who are here two and a half days a week and we have a school chaplain because we're a catholic school. We also have the heads of house and tutors who are excellent... If it's obviously a kid who's at breaking point then you give them support but if it's a kid who for any reason, stands up and swears at a teacher in their face, then that's it." (Senior Leader)

"I am shocked when I hear teachers at other schools bemoaning how difficult their intake is... We don't do that here. If you say something like that it will eventually permeate into what you do, affect your tactics, become an excuse. We've got a balance here, we don't make concessions but we do care." (Middle Leader)

The school also sets great store by personal connection with parents which are frank when necessary but always trying to find the positive elements which create engagement: "Potentially they're the difficult pupils, difficult parents, they're disaffected. Kids who are reasonably bright but can't be bothered, they don't want to do the homework and all the rest. Because the mentors are trying to get the parents on-board on a one-to-one basis and putting it in a very positive light then we do get far more support from parents than we would have if we didn't have these people... We have a huge number of parents now on-board because of the personal attention from mentors." (Middle Leader)

## Leadership, teaching and learning

The leadership at Cardinal Hume is relentless in its commitment to high standards of leadership, teaching and learning within the school. That is their core task which, they believe, has changed the school slowly, inexorably and fundamentally over the past few years. “I think there’s a critical mass, you somehow can get past that and then things kind of swing for you rather than against you and it’s winning that first battle...” (Senior Leader)

At the heart of that battle are thoroughness and a belief that the more difficult the task, learning or behaviour, the more consistent and dependable the adults need to be: “It’s consistency, it’s no good having all of these like purges or we’re going to do this and then nothing else happens or we’re going to do that....it’s having the consistency over all of the little things I think that happen all the time.” (Middle Leader)

You can’t teach, the leaders repeated, if you are not in control and control comes from good skills, thorough routines and applied data: “One of the key elements of our success is the fine detail tracking of the progress of individual pupils. You know, we sit around in groups on a regular basis and we demand data from heads of departments about progress of the pupils – that data comes to us, we collate it, we attach mentors, we attach extra work, extra lessons, whatever it happens to be. But we don’t do it in a blanket way, we will sit down and go through a list of names. However long that list needs to be is how long it will be and we talk about each individual pupil.” (Senior Leader)

“I came during PGCE, my tutor said ‘good luck’ so I expected it to be awful, but loved it; the routines are in place, whatever happened, it had been planned for. If it needs to be fixed it gets acknowledged, nothing is swept under the carpet.” (Teacher)

That attention to detail applies also to the support and development of staff whose performance is also closely monitored in ways which add to rather than detract from their job satisfaction: “I just find it incredible the amount of work and effort that we get out of our staff over and above what might be expected. They just come up with more than you would expect time and time again.” (Senior Leader)

In turn, middle leaders and teachers talk about the leadership using phrases like these quotes: “United – never avoid a problem; they will always back you up, not in a way that makes you feel underestimated, you feel supported...”

“They are just supportive, observation is backed up with supportive analysis; always suggestions for improvement, constructively made...”

“Lots of help with coaching T and L meetings, everyone helping, chipping in, self-evaluating, it’s someone’s lesson you’re all watching...”

“It now feels good to be part of a winning team and we are going places here. Everybody feels as if they are making a contribution and wants to contribute. Why would you want to work anywhere else – high expectations are not easy, but they are better.”

This is not a staff that has assembled by chance. Some staff have been encouraged or even required to leave because they could not or would not match the high expectations. Some have been purposefully encouraged to apply because the quality of their work was known through professional networks of one kind or another. Every effort is made to retain staff and none were expected to leave this summer. Staff recruited as classroom assistants are increasingly encouraged to think about teacher training as a career option. The leadership is purposefully assembling professionals of proven quality or great potential who share a commitment to changing young people’s lives.

None of this is lost on the students who know that the staff can occasionally be “angry, loud or moody” but described them overall as: “Caring, understanding, devoted, organised, confident, enthusiastic, fair, smart and business like.”

In a theme which appeared to surprised the adult leaders, the students understood and deeply appreciated the dress code for staff as a symbolic recognition of the school’s importance: “We have to wear a uniform and so do they (that’s fair) – there’s a dress code for staff, the only exception are the PE staff who still have to wear the school tops and colours –, no jeans no trainers.” (Student)

Students were confident that the alternative school leadership, “do you mean the bullies”, were being well dealt with by staff supported by most of the students.

### **People and relationships**

The leaders at Cardinal Hume work hard to nurture the quality of relationships across the school, between everyone who comes onto the school site, regularly or occasionally.

“Leading from the front is our role and part of what we do but it’s actually doing the job on a day in and day out basis, being seen, our presence should be felt all the time.” (Senior Leader)

That effort is recognised, appreciated and responded to by the vast majority of the school community, some of whom recall a period of ‘top-down’, ‘directive’ leadership which they think was much needed when the school was at its lowest point.

It was sometimes difficult to tell whether the relationships being discussed were those between adults or between adults and students. The student who said, “Does this school make you ambitious? They push you to do your best. They make you feel as if you want to do it and can do it”, could have been speaking for the staff who describe the leadership in such similar terms:

“We’ve come through a lot to get way where we are... it’s not always been like this, loyalty is an important word.”

“The way that challenge is done here is designed to produce the best solution, not just to show power or intellect. It is the argument that wins the day, not the person’s position.”

“Things have been done by priority, systems and layers, not everything at one go.”

“The leadership is always approachable, never intimidating.”

“We speak to one another politely and respectfully but roles are clear.”

“They are never satisfied and I’m happy with how they do that because it makes it easier to do my job well.... I feel allowed, not forced...”

“The reasons you stay are not the reasons you come...”

And finally.....

“Relationships with senior management are what defines the school...” (Middle Leader)



# Castilion

## Context

Castilion Primary School hides in a cul de sac of modern housing just a few yards from the south bank of the river Thames, nearly ten miles east of central London. The school is on the most northern edge of Thamesmead, a 'new town' in the London Borough of Bexley, built on reclaimed marshland. Groundwork for the new town was started in the 1960s and as the builders moved north towards the river, the school opened in 1985 with the present headteacher in charge from the start. Housing around the school is relatively low density and was designed originally to attract owner occupiers but the 1990s recession and the transfer of ownership to housing trusts thwarted the planners. The area is now predominantly social housing. The northerly horseshoe curve of the river around Thamesmead restricts the possibilities for rail and road access and gives the area an isolated, peninsular feel.

There are about 280 pupils on roll at Castilion in Reception to Year 6 and another two dozen or so in the nursery. The two largest ethnic groups are black African and white British, each of which is a bit more than a third of the total, the former having recently become the larger group. There are approaching thirty first languages though most are spoken only by one or two children. English is the predominant first language and Yoruba the second most common. Just under half of the Year 6 pupils have spent their entire primary school career at Castilion. About a fifth of the pupils are entitled to free school meals and the school's own surveys show that few of the pupils have access to many books at home and very few are taken to places of interest by parents. Parental support for academic work, particularly reading, writing and general homework is described as very limited. The school reports that only a small percentage of the indigenous white parents might be described as socially, economically and academically aspirational though a larger percentage of black African parents are.

The most recent Ofsted inspection, in 2007, described Castilion as a good school with outstanding features where pupils enjoy themselves, work hard and achieve well. By the end of Year 2 and Year 6, pupils reach higher than average standards. In particular, the report notes, pupils from black African heritages do much better at this school than is often found in other schools. Pupils with learning difficulties and those learning English as an additional language make good progress, benefitting from a good curriculum and effective support. Pupils, who join and leave the school at intermittent times in the school year, are well supported and also achieve well. Good leadership, especially by the headteacher and senior staff, contributes much to this success and to the good care provided for the pupils.

The percentage of pupils attaining Level 4 at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2007 was 97 per cent in English, 80 per cent in Maths and 100 per cent in Science. The CVA of 100.8 placed the school in the top 20 per cent on that criterion nationally.

## Community and culture

The headteacher at Castilion is better placed to know and understand the local community than almost anyone else. He has been the headteacher since the school opened in 1985 with 35 children, mostly, he recalls, white British with only two Afro-Caribbean pupils. Private buying evaporated in the housing slump of the early 1990s and the builders sold the remaining stock to a housing trust which moved in families from all over south-east London. Professional families began to move out and the social mix of the area moved towards a mainly unskilled, working class base with more ethnic diversity than before. This change presented challenges to the school because the aspirations of the population, still predominantly white British, were lower than the preceding professional families. The recently arrived cohort of pupils from African backgrounds appears in general to have higher aspirations for education than their white British peers. All these waves of social movement confirm the headteacher in his commitment to think of every pupil as an individual irrespective of their race, creed, colour or background: "We are here," he says, "for the benefit of all our children and to develop everyone who comes here to their full potential." A core of aspirational pupils is helpful, he says, but not absolutely necessary.



This is a view shared by the long standing deputy head who came to Castilion from another Bexley school only half a mile away: “When you’re working in a school in an area like this, it is not actually as much a challenge as you would expect; once you get into the school, children are children, responding to praise and encouragement like all children do. If they feel that you’re on their side and you have their interests at heart, positive relationships and outcomes follow from that.”

The challenge of engaging parents from the local community was summed up by one of the school governors talking about the importance of helping parents to understand how important school can be and what parents can do to support their children: “We have the children, and we can impact on the children; we don’t have the parents and it is difficult to impact on them unless they want us to. When I was at school, it was dire and a lot of our younger parents’ memories are that school was dire, so if they get a phone call they might dismiss it.... If you haven’t had a reasonable education and you haven’t seen that it has helped you to get a job and to get along in your working life, and if you’re not working then you can’t understand what it is all about. We work to help parents understand how important school is. Parents here might not understand that they need to support, after all that’s why they send their children to school to learn. We’re trying to break that cycle.”

The school knows that parents will turn up to the events their children are involved in but not to general meetings about school life, so those events become important fixtures in the calendar. The same governor told us: “We have to restrict tickets to the Christmas plays; everybody turns up – granny and everybody. On sports day chairs are four rows deep, the whole length of the field. Of course, they’re interested in their children, not in school in general.”

### **Leadership, teaching and learning**

The leadership team at Castilion stands or falls by the quality of teaching and learning it provides for pupils at the school. That starts with an uncompromising approach to the recruitment of the right staff, both teachers and assistants. More than three quarters of the current teaching staff started their teaching career at the school and the leadership puts a premium on recruiting newly qualified teachers from the London area.

“It is difficult to recruit because we are on a peninsular and Thamesmead has not had a good reputation over the years. Wages are higher in the neighbouring inner London borough and schools have better funding, so the opportunities for progression and promotion are better down the road. If we recruit NQTs from the area and who have family in the area then they tend to stay. If we recruit people from other parts of the country they tend to struggle financially because accommodation is expensive and this is not the easiest place to get to. Of the NQTs I’ve appointed in recent years, the ones who have left were from other parts of the country and they’ve returned to their home.” (Headteacher)

“We don’t get experienced teachers applying for jobs here. We get NQTs who apply with an open mind and without negative experiences so they come with enthusiasm. The systems we have here support them well and they develop into good teachers... All of our teachers apart from myself and one other have started here as NQTs. Those who don’t enjoy the experience move on quite quickly...” (Deputy Head)

Part of ‘the experience’ the deputy head refers to is methodical monitoring of the teaching provision allied to a strong professional development programme. In one of those moments which occurred in our visits, when school leaders described their commitment to developing adults and children in phrases which were virtually indistinguishable from one another, the deputy talked about that approach:

“If you leave a teacher to get on in their world and they think everything is fine, then to them everything is fine. But if someone they know points out that they might be able to do things differently and improve the pupils’ understanding, they are prepared to think again... if our recruitment and support is right then the challenge becomes more exciting than threatening.

“The monitoring system here is very good so we can identify needs and we respond to those needs. Young teachers are mostly open to that support. I think we end up here with teachers who welcome the professional development and grow with it. The minority who don’t want to put an effort into improvement tend to move for an easier school.

Teachers are always networking and picking one another’s brains, you see them after school moving from room to room.” (Deputy Head)

Professional development opportunities are created in and out of school and there is a strong encouragement to have the experiences accredited and certificated.

In order to maintain the level and consistency of teaching provision, Castilion avoids the use of supply teachers and ensures that cover is provided by teachers on its own staff:

“We stretch our finances to employ three teachers without classroom responsibility so that all our curriculum release time, PPA time and absence are covered by a teacher who does not have a class responsibility. They know what our philosophy is, they know our collegiate approach, they know our systems and they know what we are trying to do. That has made a big difference, I’m sure, especially to standards of pupil attainment and also pupil behaviour.” (Headteacher)

Teaching assistants are also an important part of the fabric at Castilion. They are predominantly local people, often parents of past or present pupils. Their time is carefully allocated and dispersed around the classrooms on the basis of an analysis of need which the head and deputy process and report to the staff. This transparent approach ensures that the teachers understand and can accept the variable allocations of teaching assistant time.

Care is also taken over the development of the teaching assistants who are trained to work with the class teachers in supporting children’s learning. Like everyone else at Castilion, the teaching assistants are monitored and supported. There are formal links with local providers to enhance the development offer for teaching assistants.

“We developed a performance management scheme for teaching assistants so that we could identify their INSET needs as well. The senior management team shares the monitoring and analysis because we think it’s so important. We then offer some specific activities for individuals – perhaps in an area of special needs if that’s what is needed. There are also some general events for teaching assistants, like IT or maths. Sometimes they share in the whole school INSET with teachers; we did that with speech and language, helping children to ask questions and to ask for help when they need it.” (Deputy Head)

The school uses both its own skills and a wider network to support its professional development programme and refresh its enthusiasm. The head and deputy talk about anticipating national initiatives, using the best and resisting the worst of what they have to offer. Castilion applied for and was accepted on the national Making Good Progress, trialling new ways to assess, report and stimulate progress in schools. This ensures that no child stalls or gets stuck at any stage. The school was a founder member of the local SCITT [School Centred Initial Teacher Training] and is a partner with Greenwich University. The excellent Key Stage 2 science attainments in part reflect its partnership with a specialist science college and a local primary school science project.

The school pays the same careful attention to detail for its pupils' development as it does for the adults. Pupil progress, especially their academic achievement, is carefully measured and tracked all the way through the school so that staff and parents always know where every child is at in terms of their national curriculum levels. Each pupil is set challenging targets for the year ahead, based on their previous year's attainment and internal assessments. The monitoring then includes pupil target cards on which are written the personal small step targets in the four core subjects, encouraging each individual to focus on their next step in learning. There is also a framework of continuous and annual internal assessments, termly tracking grids for English and maths, and full end of year written reports. Parents are involved through the termly parent and child open evenings, children's reports, the target cards, home-school reading record book, and homework.

Pupil behaviour at Castilion was described as 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2007. One key feature of the school's work is a whole-school approach based on assertive discipline:

"That's another reason why, though we've had difficulties recruiting, if I can get people to come and see the school they are usually keen to come here. One of the first things prospective recruits ask, particularly NQTs, is do you have a behaviour policy? We can put our hands on our hearts and say 'yes we do, everybody has to work the system and they have no choice. If you don't want to work that system, there's no point in you coming here'. NQTs particularly find some security in that..." (Headteacher)

### People and relationships

Warm personal relationships and pupil outcomes across all the Every Child Matters (ECM) range are important at Castilion: "Of course we work to the ECM agenda. If we stop and think, we know we've always worked in that way. Success has always depended on it, even before it was a political football. You can't be successful unless you do." (Headteacher)

The work on pupils' personal development and well-being was another feature of the school graded as outstanding by Ofsted in the inspection report which went on to say that the pupils 'thoroughly enjoy school' where 'they learn to co-operate, share, take turns, express their views and develop a good sense of responsibility'.

Respect is a recurring theme in conversations around the school and captured by a Year 6 pupil who described the headteacher: "He is strict, not very strict, strict enough... You can have a laugh with him but if you've done something wrong, he let's you know who is boss..."

In an echo of that, the pupils say that the best things about Castilion are:

- quite a few friendly people, the grown ups we mean
- all the teachers treat us equally – no favourites
- teachers are not too strict
- if any bullying starts it is sorted out quickly and really well

They feel encouraged and helped to take a positive role in managing activities and behaviour in free time around the corridors and playground.

A parent, now working as a teaching assistant described how the quality of personal relationships permeates the school: “My boy had a few problems at his other school and he’s a different child compared to then because of the time and effort the staff have put in. There are quite a few local people working here, so I asked to come for the work experience on my teaching assistant course and ... you just fit in, you all work together. I did work experience in other schools and the atmosphere is different. The teachers and pupils all know one another. You can actually see here that there are no different levels. They talk to the children as if they are just having a general chat. Sometimes I sit in the class and I’m fascinated by how the teacher works and feel like I could put my hand up and join in. Work is taken seriously here but it is fun...”

# Edward Sheerien

## Context

Edward Sheerien Secondary is a smaller than average school with 769 pupils aged 11-16. The school, located in South Yorkshire, serves some of the most socially deprived wards in its local authority. A substantial number of pupils come from areas of high unemployment and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, 28 per cent, is more than double the national average. Acorn data shows that more than three quarters of the families fall into the hard pressed category with only 1.3 per cent classed as wealthy achievers. The percentage of pupils with special educational needs is slightly above the national average at 19 per cent. Historically, the majority of pupils attending the school have been of white British heritage. Over the last three years there has been an increase of ethnic minority pupils, in particular of Eastern European origin and the percentage of pupils who speak English as an additional language has risen from 1.8 per cent to 9 per cent.

The prior attainment of pupils on entry into Year 7 is significantly lower than local and national averages. In 2006, just under half had achieved level 4 at Key Stage 2 in English, 44 per cent in mathematics and 61 per cent in science. In general, low levels of literacy affect attainment across the curriculum. The school describes itself as 'improving' and despite results remaining below local and national averages, significant improvements are being made.

'The school has taken some very effective steps to tackle shortcomings identified by the last inspection, particularly with regard to information and communication technology (ICT), attendance, the curriculum and the overall quality of teaching and learning. The school has good capacity to continue this improvement.' (Ofsted, 2006)

Attainment at GCSE also remains below the local and national averages (56 per cent 5\*A-C and 24 per cent including English and maths), however through provision of a more vocational curriculum to suit the specific learning needs and abilities of the pupils the school has seen significant improvements in recent years. Overall progress made by students between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 was high – the CVA score for 2007 of 1026.2 placed the school comfortably inside the top quartile nationally.

'Standards remain below average at both key stages but are rising, and achievement is good. The latest available data for Key Stage 3 from the Fisher Family Trust and DfES figures for 2006 indicate that progress is well above expectations.' (Ofsted, 2006)

Edward Sheerien is due to close next year and amalgamate with neighbouring school. The new school will be temporarily housed on two sites for a year and will then open as an Advanced Learning Centre (ALC) in new buildings with approximately 1400 pupils.

## Community and culture

The teaching staff interviewed come from working class backgrounds and from the local area. They are all ambitious to improve the nature of the local community, feeling that they can contribute to raising the aspirations of the pupils through example.

"It's the background I came from myself. I came from a working class background, my dad was a bus driver, my mum was a cleaner. We didn't have a car, we lived in a council house. They can't say anything that they haven't got that I hadn't got – I've done it, been there and got the t-shirt" (Head of English)

"I'm from the same sort of background, my dad was a miner, so I know all about that side of things. If we can only show, by the way we conduct ourselves and talk to the kids – they'll see we're not totally from another planet compared to them – that we've managed to achieve ... We've got a good set of young staff, male and female, that hopefully can engender that and provoke that so that the kids can see 'I want to be like that.'" (Head of Year 11)

The changing nature of the cohort, in particular the big increase in ethnic minority pupils, is currently placing a huge demand on resources which are stretched in order to support the diverse needs of the more deprived and children with special educational needs.

“That brings it’s challenges with regard to the skills of staff and the ability to integrate ...the difficulty is finding the correct support in so many different languages, because they’re all different, towards reintegration to mainstream.” (Head)

The range of language support needed for pupils to access the full range curriculum areas is a big issue for the school. The headteacher describes one pupil in Year 11 who achieved an A in maths but couldn’t make up the shortfall in English. The school has managed to recruit some volunteers to support the Polish pupils but due to the wide range of countries that pupils have come from, support cannot be supplied for all.

White working class boys are often described as the group presenting the greatest challenge in school. These boys tend to have limited social communication skills affecting how they interact and respond. Low levels of articulation have marked impact on their writing skills. However, it is widely felt that one of the main problems is a lack of positive role models within the community.

“Deliberate unemployment ... it is not always the case that people can’t get jobs, the benefits culture is embedded in some families. The more we look at it and observe, the more it is an issue, there is a general lack of ambition and a lack of aspirations.” (Head)

Few of the parents engage directly with their child’s education. So long as the children are in school and behaving, that is good enough; there is no problem and learning does not need to be supported from home.

Boys’ underachievement is being addressed directly through the National Education of Boys Breakthrough Programme, in which particular cohorts are targeted and have responded very well. The deputy head explains: “It worked because those boys also felt very special”. A lot of ideas have been rolled out across school: “Because, actually, it’s just darn good learning for boys and for girls. What’s good for boys is also good for girls, but it’s even better for boys if you’ve got to bring them up.”

However, the strong focus has to be maintained in order to continue being successful with this group, this presents a challenge. It is not possible to keep putting the intensity of resources and time into one area when there are so many other groups in need of support.

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

Leadership of the school has been stable for many years. The headteacher has worked here for 28 years, the past eleven as head after progressing from head of geography, to head of lower school, to deputy head, to acting head and then, finally, to headteacher.

The current management structure is in a period of transition. Because of the proposed amalgamation, leadership structures have been changed to support the schools through a transition – one of the deputy heads is currently acting head at the amalgamating school, the other deputy head is seconded there two days per week. This has left the SLT at Edward Sheerien somewhat ‘thin’ this year.

“The fact that there are so few in the SLT here, is testament to the work that we’ve done – investing in other people as others have stepped up to take other roles and opportunities for the future and development for themselves.” (Head)

When the new newly built ALC opens in September 2010, the larger leadership team of eight will include the current headteacher as Principal, one deputy head as Vice Principal for Learning and Teaching, the Acting head as Vice Principal for Well-being. In addition there will be Assistant Principals of Inclusion, Care, Support and Guidance, Resources, Standards and Community. The post of SENCO was considered by teaching staff to be key in the identification of pupil needs.

“15 years ago, that information about kids’ needs was not available – just recently the information I’ve been given on the needs of the kids in 7, 8 and 9 – there’s pages of the stuff...” (Head of English)

Teaching staff interviewed, one of whom has worked at Edward Sheerien for 32 years, the other for 17 years, feel that the current headteacher had been a catalyst for change. They recount how the previous head had been in post for a long time, describing his management style as ‘traditional’: “Of the old school ...he had his faults but he had his plus points as well.” (Head of Year 11)

When he retired, the current head took post and, the staff feel, this was the point from which improvements happened: “Then we got into a new regime with a different ethos.” (Head of Year 11)

Everyone interviewed feels that teamwork played a big part in the success of the school

“Everybody pulls together, there’s a real team spirit and everybody supports each other and I actually do think that where there are challenges with the youngsters, you do have to pull together.” (Deputy head)

The adaptability of the staff is also widely held to be a distinctive feature: because the pupil population has such diverse needs, new approaches are constantly developed to support those needs. The needs are not only diverse but also constantly changing: the influx of ethnic minority pupils, the increasing trend in pupils with autism and aspergers syndrome or a change in government policy for example to promote inclusion.

“It’s not a scientific study of leadership – it’s just seeing what works and what doesn’t work.” (Deputy)

“I think it has evolved. We’ve seen the advantage in some initiatives and of being part of those. The local authority have looked to us as a school that is interested in different approaches and been involved in that. We take pride in the fact that everything we do is joined together. We’re not doing things just as a gimmick, it’s all done for a purpose and it’s got to have more than one benefit.” (Headteacher)

One of the strengths of the current leadership is how it allows, supports and expects staff to develop; staff who work hard and want to progress up the career ladder are encouraged to do so: “Staff move on and forward but not elsewhere.” (Headteacher)

This results in a feeling of well-being amongst staff:

“Staff are rewarded for their efforts ... if you can prove yourself to be good at what you’re doing, opportunities are made available to you. You don’t have to look elsewhere.” (Head of geography)

“The reason for that is that we are good at empowering staff and developing staff. We do invest heavily in that because it does clearly impact on the way that we work and people wouldn’t stay in a place if they weren’t happy.” (Headteacher)

Alongside the change of ethos brought about by the new headteacher, the various strategies employed to achieve success range from streaming the classes, reducing class size, additional support, celebrating achievement and diversifying the curriculum.

- Streaming is organised, as part of a long-term strategy on entry to Year 7 (class 1, higher ability to class 6, lowest ability) primarily based on students' English ability as reflected by the Key Stage 2 SATs results.
- Reduced class size is a strategy said to have had a huge impact. In English for Years 8 to 11, the two classes below the highest ability group are split into three. "You're meeting the needs there by having a much smaller group, you can give them time, you can give them support, so that helps a lot." (Head of English)
- Additional support is a significant school investment to meet the diverse needs of the cohort: "We have loads of intervention now, support workers, CSAs, other teachers, learning mentors – there's loads of support that goes on." (Head of English)
- Celebration of achievement is central to the school ethos: "We celebrate achievement more than ever before, every opportunity." (Head of Geography)
- Appropriateness of curriculum, in particular the offer of a range of vocational courses introduced into an expanded curriculum over the past ten years, was stressed by all the staff: "There are a number of GNVQs, BTECs etc that are appropriate for the kids' needs." (Head of geography)

It is felt that this is now contentious because GCSE successes are expected to include English and Maths and schools held accountable accordingly.

"It meets the needs of our kids more now, the ethos of the school and the curriculum that we offer ... the A-Cs are probably not dissimilar to nine years ago if we take the traditional curriculum." (Head of geography)

The school also provides specifically targeted support at key times, for example in preparation for exams.

"We used to just slot the SATS in but now the focus of the week is the Key Stage 3 subjects and the support that is given." (Head of Year 11)

Pupils are taken away by coach to a hotel conference centre for a revision day, given a meal and work on revision. It is a kind of working treat:

"It's very informal and helps a lot - they probably work more on that day than they would in a normal day." (Head of English)

Also, on the actual SATs days pupils come into school early and are given breakfast

"To make sure they've got some food inside them, they get bacon butties or sausage butties." (Head of English)

They also have a session with a member of staff in preparation for the tests. This extra nurture is designed to make the pupils feel that they are important and to get them into the frame of mind for working.



## People and relationships

Interviewees described the school as welcoming and friendly and recounted five or six stories in which a supply teacher or trainee teacher had come to the school and ended up staying.

There is low staff turnover at Edward Sheerien and a general feeling of contentment, though not complacency, amongst staff. Interviewees felt this was due to staff being given the opportunity to develop within the school structure and being mutually supportive.

“We’re all clear about our roles and responsibilities, we all appreciate where each other are at and I mean emotionally as well as workload or whatever. We are all very clear, we work as a team and everything’s joined up and I think, crucially, that’s what makes it all work.” (Deputy head)

There were comments in the interviews about what the air of support and nurture owes to the gender balance of the SLT: “I think a lot of it is intuitive, it’s not something we started and have a grand plan for, it has developed.” (Head)

Those interviewed, particularly those from the local area with similar working class backgrounds, show a clear understanding of the pupils’ needs and express the desire and commitment to help them to achieve their potential. The headteacher explained: “Some pupils are dealing with very difficult personal circumstances ... it is not about sympathy or empathy, feeling sorry for youngsters is not going to help them.”

Her vision is to support pupils’ needs in order to remove the barriers to learning to enable them to achieve. “If we are able to do that, their life chances improve and they are likely to make a positive contribution as adults.” (Head)

# Elizabeth Garrett Anderson

## Context

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College (EGA) is a girls' comprehensive school in the London Borough of Islington, close to King's Cross railway station. The school has more than 1,000 pupils aged between 11 and 16 recruited from up to 70 primary schools, with many travelling from neighbouring boroughs. Overall, there are high levels of social deprivation in the area and more than 40 per cent of students claim free school meals even though a large number of eligible families do not register their entitlement. There is a wide ranging social and cultural mix in the area, reflected in the school's population where students come from more than sixty different ethnic backgrounds. The largest groups represented are from Bangladesh, Africa and the Caribbean. Around 60 per cent of students are from homes where the first language, one of the 59 first languages at the school, is not English. There is a high proportion of students joining or leaving the college other than in Year 7, and one in five of the students are from families which are refugee or asylum seekers.

In addition to its specialist status, EGA was one of the first schools to be accredited nationally as an Extended School and has the Artsmark Gold Award for achievement and provision in the arts amongst a number of local and national recognitions of its work.

EGA's most recent full Ofsted inspection, in September 2008, concluded that it is an outstanding school 'in which each and every pupil really does matter'. The students' achievement is judged to be excellent while the 'exceptional' care, guidance and support provided by the school are described as a real strength. The currently good teaching is being improved through systematic and rigorous monitoring while there is highly effective practice beyond the classroom to support vulnerable students.

The current headteacher took up this, her second headship, in the summer of 2005. Her previous headship had been described by Ofsted as excellent in vision, planning and management. One of her major challenges at EGA has been to deal with two major budget constraints: an inherited and increasing deficit and a reduction in admission numbers from 240 to 180 reflecting the fall in student numbers across the borough. Despite the consequent uncertainties and despite student attainment on entry being well below average, the student outcomes have continued to improve. GCSE results at the end of Key Stage 4 rose from 36 per cent of the students obtaining 5A\*-C grades including English and maths in 2005 to 43 per cent in 2007. The school's CVA of 1011 put it in the top 40 per cent of schools in 2007 on that measure. In 2008, for the very first time, the school will be over-subscribed.

EGA is included in our study because, compared to other schools in our sample, it illustrates a different kind of challenge to its leadership.

- It is a single sex, girls' school: the other secondary schools in our sample are mixed and much of the debate about white working class underachievement has focused misguidedly on boys.
- The school leadership, with a headteacher of three years standing, is relatively new compared to others in our sample.
- The school has identified white, working class underachievement relatively recently and is at an early stage in working out the best ways to respond.
- The response will have to accommodate, perhaps even to build on, success the school has with other ethnic groups. Much of what the school does evidently works most of the time for most of the students and does not need fixing – so where is the margin for manoeuvre?

EGA's benefit to the project is not so much an insight into what the leadership have been doing as to how a leadership with a good track record begins to address what in their school is a minority underachievement. We are grateful to the school leaders, staff, students and parents who were prepared to share their insights, insecurities and ambitions for the benefit of other schools.

The school leadership has identified white British girls as the lowest achieving group in the school, as they are, in broad terms, amongst girls nationally and confirmed this as a priority for improvement. Although 56 per cent of EGA's Year 11 students reached 5A\*-C last year, in the white British the figure was only 39 per cent. The comparable figures for 5A\*-C including English and maths were 43 per cent and 33 per cent; for CVA Key Stage 2-4, the figures were 1018 and 957. This is a major and mystifying challenge in the eyes of the school's leadership although there were some clues, in an improved CVA for that group at Key Stage 3, that some improvement was beginning to emerge.

## **Community and culture**

The leadership team at EGA has a strong and shared commitment to working with young women from this relatively poor part of a borough with dramatic ranges of personal wealth. The headteacher deliberately chose to come to what she describes as substantial challenge. She talks about the importance of 'reading your community' in circumstances like these: "You need to read complex situations and not take them at face value, be prepared to understand people's identity and be able to get in tune with values of their community. If you don't understand the values of their community how could you ever expect them to understand and buy into the values of the school – it's a two way process." (Head)

This means changing local perceptions which have not kept up with changes in the school's performance while making sure that anything which diverts energy or other resources away from the core business of teaching and learning connects with and pays a definite dividend for the student outcomes.

So EGA, as would be expected of any excellent school, actively solicits the participation of the students' parents and has extensive connections with groups and businesses in the areas its students come from. There is good evidence that the former works well for the vast majority of parents who in successive surveys express their satisfaction and confidence in the school. It is more difficult to assess the other 'community' connections because a major challenge facing a school in EGA's context is the problem of defining what community it serves. The geographical, ethnic and social spread of the school's intake described in the opening paragraph is remarkable and defies description as a single community. In this inner-city context, the word community is used variably to mean people in a particular locality, people who share an economic position or people from one ethnic background. In the main, this draws the school into patterns of activity which build networks with partners, not least business partners, beyond its own locality, which influence perceptions amongst the small traders and residents in the immediate neighbourhood and which engage parents individually and directly in the education of their children. Where contact is made with communities, it is mainly directed through community-based officers or bilingual community workers at recently arrived groups, for example from Somalia, Bangladesh, Turkey and Portugal.

The school is encouraging one of its staff in a research project built around its own data to try to understand the issues it is facing: "We've been trying to get a more confident understanding of why, drilling down the data on individual students. We don't want quick fixes. So looking at a range of variables, single parents, gifted and talented, free school meals and SEN, we found that the big dip is for students for whom we have limited or no contact or details for parents at home. There's more to do, some of the information is dated and we need to check against what we know about attendance at parental meetings.

“We’ve then identified all the extra provision we offer to Year 11 and which of the students attend. And it is stark, the disengagement of this group. We are at early stages but there are definite links between the students’ disengagement and parental disengagement. We wonder if they’re repeating the experiences of their parents and grandparents. Our hypothesis at the moment is that parental contact is the most important variable but how does that then feed into the student’s experience – what creates the effect?”  
(Teacher researcher)

The research is also questioning whether the deep rooted patterns of disengagement can really be defined as a social class or community phenomenon; whether they can be better understood as a much more limited economic (ie poverty), locality (ie neighbourhood) or even family (ie personal) dynamic. Does this group of students bring a cultural identity with which the school can work or are they the individual consequences of something more complex?

The research is one example of the school’s concern about this group. The staff involved are very committed and they are revealing just how much the school’s own information can help. The governing body are well aware of the issues and prepared to work through some responses, not least raising the aspirations of young women who are drifting away from educational opportunities. The questions that the research is now putting forward are critical for the head and her team, who will need to judge the level at which their resources and effort can be most effectively deployed: ill-defined community, disengaged parents or disorientated student?

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

Leadership, teaching and learning at EGA are at a high standard except for the worrying learning outcomes for the minority of girls from low income, white British backgrounds. Those girls share the same classrooms as their peers from other groups and are given the same opportunities to take responsibility and contribute to the work of the school; school council, seniors, pupil receptions, focused lunches with the head. All the girls are encouraged to contribute as well to local events including the biennial community festival. There is the extensive careers advice which any good school would offer. The school leadership is concerned that the traditional two week block work experience in this inner-city area does not offer enough of the students a challenging opportunity and too many of them spend time in a hairdressers or a crèche that a friend knows about. The school is about to trial a model based on continuous projects – research, analysis and presentation – with high profile city organisations in the public and private sectors.

Staff believe that they have been successful in challenging negative stereotypical expectations in some groups and will use the school’s research as a basis for mounting a challenge to low expectations in the white British group.

“How are the white working class portrayed in the media – chavs, that can’t help...?”

“Perhaps we cannot move parents and perhaps we need to do things here to break rooted patterns so looking at cultural identity... but what is that for the white working class?”

“We can use the new curriculum orders on community, so when students arrive we might talk about what is your place in school and society and wider community. Make double sure we are valuing everybody.”

“The study of culture in the curriculum is often associated with other culture; do white working class students from round here have any sense of their community?”

(Teachers)

The school works to create a narrative for each of the students: “What kind of life do you want, what do you want to do? How can we help you do that? We’re trying to create a buy in....” (Senior Leader)

It is acutely aware, in part because it is a champion for young women and in part because of its deep commitment to social and ethnic inclusion, that there are both opportunities and dangers in identifying particular groups for attention and resources. There are resources from national and local funding streams aimed at other groups and parents from white, British backgrounds do ask ‘What is the school doing for me?’ EGA wants to be more confident that whatever it does do will be well focussed and pay a dividend: “We are very careful about inclusion and representation, if we suddenly say we are doing something for a particular group that might be perceived as unfair. We have funding for EMAG [Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant] and some ethnic community liaison workers. If we do something for another group, it needs to be right – morally and effectively.” (Head)

Like other 11-16 schools in our study, professional leaders and governors at EGA feel that the lack of a sixth form does create another barrier to raising ambition: “We can’t show the models of success day by day; staying on and being supported; we can’t support them over the hump and the difference, college, is too much for some.” (Senior Leader)

## People and relationships

Relationships are important for adults and students at EGA and, again, work well for most but not well enough, the staff point out, to commit all of the students who are at the margin of the schools’ life. The staff’s concern that there is more to be done for some students, should not distract from what they are already achieving. The 2008 Ofsted reported that: ‘The positive relationships and rich diversity of the school population ensures that the girls’ cultural and social development is excellent. Learning to work together prepares them well for working in a diverse society.... The girls make a positive contribution to their local community [and] understand the global community...’ The 2007 Year 11 exit survey reported how much the students had appreciated their relationships –with teachers and friends.

White British students across the age range, interviewed for this study, were articulate and apparently sophisticated about relationships in the school. They understood the formal hierarchy around the headteacher, deputies, heads of year and heads of house. The message they were being given was perfectly clear: “In assemblies they tell us how good the school is, how well we will do, stories about girls who have done well and say we can do this.” (Year 7 student)

They could also describe the formal ways in which their views could be expressed to seniors (older girls with specific responsibilities) or through the school council. They had thoughtful insights into the less formal but no less real world they shared with their peers:

“It is tough starting at a new school. If you are in the right class and meet the right people you will be okay but if you are in the wrong class and meet the wrong people then you’d wish you never started school... You have to be the right person with the right people, then you can go about your ways at school and no-one will say anything to you, they will say hi even if they don’t really know you.” (Year 8 student)

“Other girls in school, most in Year 10 [are leaders], there were some in Year 11 but they’re too busy with exams and Year 10 have filled that gap. It doesn’t bother me. They think they are the best .They are probably the rudest ones, naughty, the noisy ones, the worst academic ones. If there is a group like that you can’t concentrate or get on with the work.” (Year 9 student)

Although they were aware of their minority status, they did not see and resisted any suggestion that there were ethnic trends in patterns of behaviour or attachment to the school. Social behaviour and connections, not skin colour, were for them the defining status symbols.

Personal relationships right across the school are important to the headteacher. She describes how struck she has been by one particular relationship: the role of mothers (whose own education is a persistent correlate in national studies with their children's educational attainment): "No parent wants their child to leave school without qualifications – and you need to make the connections for them, what will work... I've become attuned here to mother and daughters... most of the time I meet their mothers, the relationship between adolescent girls and their mothers. I have to be more interested and knowledgeable." (Head)

The school is planning a residential for mothers and daughters next year and hopes eventually to work with a cohort in primary school so they can "try to get a shared understanding between mother and child about education and a shared sense of values and engagement back within the school process." (Senior Leader)

# Greenside

## Context

Greenside is a large primary school with 442 pupils in the age range 3-11. It serves a diverse urban area in Greater Manchester containing large pockets of challenging social and economic circumstances. The ward served by the school falls within the lowest fifth of the most disadvantaged in the country. Almost a quarter (23 per cent) of pupils live in the top 20 per cent of the most deprived Super Output Areas (SOAs) and a further 28 per cent in the top 30 per cent of deprived SOAs. The school's SEF reports an increasing number of learners are from dysfunctional or fragmented families. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is at 24 per cent, well above the national average. Almost all pupils are of white British heritage. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs is higher than the national average at 31 per cent.

Attainment on entry into the nursery class is well below average, the main underdeveloped areas being speech and language, personal, social and emotional development and mathematical development.

'There is a significant minority of learners who need a great deal of help to succeed in school as they do not enjoy the supportive background that many others have.' (School SEF)

The school achieves particular success with the more needy pupils in the school, in part through early identification and intervention. The school is a designated children's centre offering a wide range of onsite community services. A focus on individualised learning and a school ethos of trust and mutual support also contribute to their success. The school's 2008 Ofsted inspection reported that:

'Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are identified at an early stage and effective support is given to make sure they achieve well. The school makes very effective use of outside agencies to support vulnerable pupils and families.'

Around 20 per cent of learners are from reasonably affluent backgrounds and school staff are concerned that more able, gifted and talented pupils may not receive the support to realise their full potential. When the headteacher started at Greenside in 1991, the school was very low-achieving, parents had low expectations and low aspirations: "I didn't have the opinion that it was organised around the children." (Headteacher)

The school had a very low reputation in the community and was under-subscribed. Of the six primary schools in the area, Greenside was the only one without uniform, homework was never set and they were one of two schools with no nursery. The head commented that all the children are capable of achieving but that it had taken a long time to raise their aspirations. The overall CVA score for 2007 was 99.9.

## Community and culture

Many of the staff at Greenside have experience of working in areas of high social and economic deprivation and several come from the local area. The headteacher began his teaching career and spent his teaching practice in deprived inner city schools: "I've never worked in a school that hasn't been like this ... in my career, no one's ever let me into one of those leafy suburbs." (Headteacher)

"He's always had a vision that the school would become a community school, not just a school but a community place where people could come for all community issues - the fact that there's the health service here. He's always striven for that side of it ... to involve everybody in the community in this place." (HLTA, ICT technician and parent)

Drawing staff from the local community and employing those with previous experience of working in schools with similar cohorts, results in a deep understanding of the children and their backgrounds. It is felt that a feeling of trust can be quickly forged with parents through the sharing of values. Staff clearly enjoy the challenge of working with their particular cohort:

“... we’ve got a staff who really like to adapt and to change, they want to improve. I think it really comes down to the children, we’ve got a staff that like being with children and really want to see them achieve.” (Assistant headteacher)

These local people act as good role models for the pupils, demonstrating that disadvantaged backgrounds need not be a barrier to aspiration. A significant part of raising pupil aspirations is understanding not only their needs and how best to support them but also recognising the issues that some of the parents have. Often when a child has an issue, perhaps reflected through absence, it is a parent problem that can sometimes be quite difficult to overcome. The headteacher discussed his attitude to the persistent absence at Greenside, an indicator for which, he feels, targets don’t work: “We have families where two people have died, it’s a lone carer, life’s absolutely horrendous and every so often they have to get away for a break.”

He feels that a little understanding from him “take a week off, but the rest of the time get in here as much as you can” is far more effective than adhering to government percentages.

Pupils whose home lives may well be challenging are supported and encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning as they progress through school.

“It’s not about parents sitting and doing homework with them or reading with them, it’s about them doing it and taking ownership of that. By the end of Year 6 most of our children are aware of that, they’re quite switched on to the fact that it’s their responsibility.” (Assistant headteacher)

This is good preparation for secondary school education for which, the headteacher noted, there are particular transition difficulties for this particular cohort of children. He recounts the tales of pupils who in previous years had achieved level 4 in the Year 6 statutory tests and dropped back to level 2 or 3 over the summer break. He also mentioned the dangers of pupils succumbing to drug and alcohol abuse during this vulnerable time. He is confident that the school equipping pupils with the responsibility and awareness to take responsibility for their own wellbeing as well as their education has this problem had reduced in recent years.

The staff are committed to raising the aspirations of their pupils. All those interviewed stressed the importance of boosting the pupils’ confidence and raising their expectations:

“We’ve got such a positive ethos, we rarely make mistakes, and if we do, we learn from it and all the children appreciate that ... we’re always celebrating success, we have a lot of assemblies now where we’re giving out certificates, or even a round of applause in class or a sticker. It really does make them feel valued and I think that’s really important.” (Assistant headteacher)

“We’re constantly saying ‘we want to do our best’ and ‘we always strive to do our best’. The headteacher sees extended services and the Every Child Matters agenda as integral to achieving success at Greenside:

“This is a significant factor in all of our work and underwrites some of our improvement. We have a good, a full partnership in lots of things with Tameside Local Authority and that has enabled us to explore new models of extended service provision and has significantly facilitated some associated risk taking.”



Extended services include before and after school provision, a voluntary playgroup, early years provision through the children's centre, a private sector nursery and health services which are based between the school and the children's centre offering basic clinic services. The head plans to provide similar services at the local church hall and to network with local schools. He has been keen to encourage involvement with the community but remarks that it is difficult to find 'the community' – many groups hold meetings in the school, such as local residents, homewatch, the community police and the local council. His aim is to move towards community ownership and community leadership, but to date feels that little progress has been made because he cannot identify groups within the community beyond interest groups. He is looking for something around which the people can unite and wonders if the new gardening club, which has started to attract children, parents and grandparents for the first time, might, perhaps be an answer.

The staff have looked closely at differentiation, matching the task to the child, as a means of improving their access to learning. This in turn, led to class streaming and setting for literacy and numeracy. The school places high priority on core subject teaching, the headteacher claims this is not specifically due to the government targets – although he acknowledges that good results gives him the go ahead to carry on with his more innovative schemes – rather that good literacy and numeracy skills will enable pupils to access the secondary curriculum when they move on to high school and enable them to find employment in the future.

In order to support the individual learning needs of pupils, there has been a great deal of staff training over the years. There has also been huge investment in classroom support and the support staff are valued highly.

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

The school has stable leadership, the headteacher having been in post since 1991. The traditional model of head and deputy (both positions carried teaching responsibilities) operated in earlier years: "I didn't delegate, I didn't consult, I just introduced systems." (headteacher)

As the school expanded and developed, becoming an early excellence centre and then a children's centre gaining national reputation, the headteacher's role became increasingly complex, coupled with pressures to conform to the government driven standards agenda. The leadership was consequently restructured into a more devolved model over the last three years. A new deputy head was appointed "to work on the traditional roles of headteacher in teaching and learning". This non-teaching post allows the holder to focus specifically on teaching and learning. The leadership team also includes the head of the children's centre, the headteacher adamant that their provision be integrated rather than co-located. He is committed to the concept of all-through education and the integrated nursery provision and extended services associated with the children's centre are key to the success of the school it "helps people belong and be engaged". The headteacher's role has become more like the role of executive principal, although he insists on retaining his original title, modestly claiming that he would "lose street cred with colleagues" by changing the title. The deputy head and head of the children's centre manage the day-to-day responsibilities of the school whilst the headteacher acts as figure head, he sees his role as holder of the vision, to bring in resources and to ensure cohesion across the school. He also accepts ownership when things go wrong and expects to do something about it.

Expansion of the leadership team has also included the appointment of an assistant headteacher to support the deputy head, who increasingly covers for the headteacher on his frequent visits out of school. There is also a SENCO, a literacy manager and a numeracy manager.

Throughout the school there is a positive feeling of empowerment, stakeholders at all levels feel they have a voice. The reorganised management structure has enabled suggestions and ideas to be heard and acted upon more effectively, in previous years the headteacher and deputy head were severely constrained by time due in part to their teaching commitments. It was suggested that the headteacher's leadership and the establishment of structures, for example the co-ordinator positions, had given teachers autonomy, that their potential has been released through the new structures.

"We've grown from being allowed to take the roles ... I think that's one of the things that has kept me here ... I've really enjoyed being co-ordinators and whenever I feel there's someone else in school who could perhaps taken that over or I've taken that subject as far as I could, he will listen to you ... and that's been great and I've thoroughly enjoyed the three roles that I've had." (Classroom teacher, 14 years at the school – previously ICT co-ordinator and art co-ordinator, now music co-ordinator)

All interviewees remarked upon the sharing ethos of the school, the dedication and teamwork of the staff.

"We have a very dedicated team here ... staff work well as a team and help each other and know who to go to if they are struggling with an area – we all buzz off each other, I suppose." (Classroom teacher)

It is perhaps the strong vision held by the headteacher and his determination to improve that has driven the school into success.

'Leadership and management are good. The headteacher has a clear vision for the school and promotes effective teamwork.' (Ofsted)

Prior to 1991 he had been very career minded, never spending more than five years in one school. By 1996, Greenside had made significant progress and the headteacher had applications for other posts on his desk in preparation for his next move. Then the school suffered a major arson attack and three quarters of the school burnt to the ground. From this point, the headteacher feels that his relationship with Greenside became personal. He described how he had stood watching the fire and a reporter had asked "how does it feel to see your school burn down?"

"I've been off on one ever since, I decided that I'd stay and sort it out." (Head)

Following the fire the school population was temporarily re-housed across three different sites. The head spent six months rotating the sites "just being the face". No development work was conducted "we just survived for two years". The head describes survival of the school during this trauma being based on goodwill and staff "working beyond the call of duty" and "people learning to trust each other".

After the building work was completed there followed another difficult episode in the headteacher's leadership. The National Literacy and Numeracy strategies were implemented from 1998 and 1999 and "Ofsted raised the game". The teaching required by the new initiatives meant that certain members of staff struggled to teach to the objectives.

"I had people who had given everything but couldn't do that little bit ... if people couldn't take the journey with us, they moved on to other things and that was right." (Headteacher)

## People and relationships

The headteacher has gone out and built up relations with the local community.

“I think that’s the way it’s worked because other than that, I don’t think they would have come in. He’s spent a lot of time and worked very hard to develop relationships with people. He’s used his personality and managed to get across his ideas.” (HLTA, IT technician and parent)

In previous schools, the head had achieved active pupil engagement through sport. At one school, his chess team were winning local championships and a couple played for England in the under 11 team. On Saturdays he coached football in the morning and chess in the afternoon. The first house he called at would provide him with breakfast, someone else would ‘see him right’ for dinner and in the evening on his way home, he’d ‘be ok’ again:

“I was interacting with the community. I do believe in narrowing the gap. I’ve always believed in pushing and aspirations. We can’t tell people what to do, it’s about taking people ‘on the journey’ with you.”

The head still employs the same approach encouraging involvement which in turn leads to increased confidence and contributes to achievement. When he first arrived at the school, if there was a new club one or two pupils might turn up and the rest would stand by and watch. Now the hall is full every night and every lunch time with a range of activities and the parents are asking for more: “The kids are just involved all the time.” (Headteacher)

The headteacher is convinced that his length of service at Greenside and the extent of his work with the local community relates significantly to the school’s success. He feels that he knows the local families very well now, having seen several generations – the Year 5 and 6 pupils from 1991 are back now as parents and he knew their parents. He sees “engagement with the people” as one of the key demands of his role, being outside in the playground most mornings “being the figure head”.

His personal commitment to the success of Greenside continues. The headteacher feels there is still work to be done including to develop interactions with health, to interact with the private provider and to become an ‘outstanding’ school.

# Guildford Grove

## Context

Guildford Grove Primary School is located in the affluent town from which it takes its name but its immediate locality, Park Barn Estate, is an area of predominantly post-war social housing. Data from the local authority, Surrey, identifies the school as one of the two most socially deprived in the county. The school was formed in 2001 by the de facto amalgamation of two schools universally described as failing. In 2006, numbers on roll jumped by more than a hundred when it had to absorb pupils from a third closing school whose parents ignored the planners' intentions for an orderly end of year transfer and began to move their children across when they thought the moment was right.

The present headteacher joined the school for its opening and has been working there since with the same two deputy heads and chair of governors. The school is larger than average with over 400 on roll. The majority of the pupils live in council tenancies including the cramped, concrete council flats which overlook the school. Thirty-five per cent of the pupils have free school meals. When we visited the school, five children were on the Child Protection Register, twenty six had current social service intervention and at least three had one parent in prison. Drug use is a problem in the community; one child was recently taken into care because of his father's addiction. Most pupils are of white British heritage although, perhaps because of the proximity of the university and hospital, the proportion of minority ethnic pupils is increasing and the range of ethnic groups is wide. The potential advantage of university-based children is largely offset by their three year mobility cycle. There are twenty two first languages other than English which is spoken overall by five out of every six of the pupils. An above average proportion of pupils have learning difficulties and disabilities. This would be so even if it did not include the dozen or so pupils with profound hearing and multi-sensory impairment for whom the school provides a specialist base.

Guildford Grove's 2007 Ofsted inspection described it as a good school with outstanding features. Pupils were said to show 'a real love for learning'. Leadership and management were good with some outstanding elements. The headteacher, ably supported by her senior team, had provided excellent leadership during the challenging circumstances of the school's formation and early development. She had been highly effective in providing clear guidance, balanced with the scope for colleagues to genuinely lead and be accountable for their areas.

Many of the children arrive at school lacking personal independence and most have poorly developed social skills. The school says its pupils do not come from homes where parents sing rhymes, read stories or play counting games. This lack of creative experience contributes to poorly developed fine motor skills, but gross motor skills appear to benefit from playing out on the estate, climbing and exploring. Many of the children have poor receptive and expressive language. Behaviour is a constant challenge and a third of the pupils have special educational needs, 24 with statements. In 2007, the pupils' attainment in the SATs at the end of Key Stage 2, was for 73 per cent to reach Level 2 in English, 66 per cent in maths and 77 per cent in science. The school's CVA was 99.7 placing it in the middle 20 per cent of schools nationally. This achievement, Ofsted concluded, 'is because the teaching is good'.

## Community and culture

The headteacher at Guildford Grove went to a "traditional post-war council primary school on a council estate where the teachers made it clear she was lucky to pass the 11+". More recently, towards the end of her first headship, she spent a short time as a research fellow in school leadership and in her own words "itched to put some of that knowledge into practice in a school where it would be a challenge and might make a real difference".

She inherited a divided community of parents. The two amalgamating schools represented factions in the wider community who were separated by old arguments and perceived wrongs. Some of the adults did not really want to be seen in the same playground. Building bridges to all these parents was important for this leadership team: “We don’t think ‘come in here and we’ll do English and maths’, we’re committed to the whole child, which has to take in its family and community. The point is to help our families believe that they can control their lives because they get into a spiral where they lose control, they lose control of their homes, their children, their eating, their tempers and their relationships. We try to show how parents can help their children’s education and to raise the parents’ aspirations.” (Headteacher)

One key aspect of that approach is the school’s family assistant who when the on-site children’s centre opens in 2009 will lead a team of outreach workers.

“We think our evidence is firm, the more contact we build with families in-house, the more impact we have across the range of ECM outcomes and the lower the referral rates from our families to social services.” (Headteacher)

The family assistant’s casework is recorded using the ECM outcomes framework and there are objectives agreed for each significant intervention. Her contact begins with the nursery teacher on a home visit to every new pupil. After that, she works with parents and children in school or at home as the individual casework requires. She and the teachers describe their work as complementary and it is not unusual to see her in a classroom talking to a child. Parents know that issues raised with teachers will be passed to her and, subject to some limits on confidentiality, teachers will be kept aware of stresses at home. The family assistant was the person who recently picked up parental concerns about the new extended school day so the school could organise a meeting to surface and resolve them.

The school is also aware that the reception area and desk create powerful first impressions. The head’s personal assistant sits at an open desk in that comfortable, space: “I’ve lived in this area all my life and went to school here. It was poor before this school opened. Parents were more hostile, they used to come in all guns blazing but it’s lovely now; we’ve gained the confidence of most, nearly all of them. We’ve been trained, and the head has a big influence, to use the same positive words and ask what they really want in the end, and staying calm. The head wanted to involve the community from the start and now they bring in all kinds of things and ask if we can help, if we know someone who can help.” (Head’s Personal Assistant)

There is a belief that continuity and stability of staffing contribute to that trust and it is not only the leadership team that sticks around: “There are children here with terrible life experiences and they come into this environment and you hear their life story and after a short while they change and start to think I’m better than that, I can do better than that. They start to feel part of the community here. Lots of parents have changed too... They can see people are committed, they see you here for a while and that builds trust.” (Teacher)

Representative parents are drawn into the school’s development planning days and others are invited to anti-bullying and drugs workshops so they can contribute to the school’s policies. The school offers parenting skills classes, workshops, induction programmes for new parents, conversations at parent consultation evenings and one-to-one discussions with the family assistant and the Ed Psych [Educational Psychologist]. Parents are encouraged to help in the classroom. The Parent Teacher Association has brought parents into school to a variety of different events.

The school also uses a wide network of organisations to support its contact with parents. Local charities subsidised the start up of the breakfast club and the post of family assistant. There are strong links with the local children’s services locality team. The reading volunteer co-ordinator organises a large group of reading volunteers from local businesses and the local community to support reading across the school. A representative of the local residents recently wrote to the school complimenting its contribution to children’s improved behaviour across the locality.

## Leadership, teaching and learning

“The vision here, everybody knows, striving for the best and offering the children to have the same life experiences we’ve all had. We all just want everyone to have the best in life whoever they are and whatever their background.” (Teacher)

That simple ambition, to provide the highest quality of experience for the children, drives the leadership at Guildford Grove to pay very close attention to the recruitment and development of all the staff. The governors did not appoint on the first round of interviews for a headteacher in 2001, re-advertised and, the chair says, have not regretted that decision since: “[The head] had a good record from her previous school and at the interview she said all the things that candidates usually say, that they get from the College or wherever, but with so much conviction. We really believed her and she was right...” (Chair of Governors)

When the deputy head interviews came around, the panel was faced with two outstanding candidates and did what many of the schools we visited are prone to do when recruiting – they improvised to get the best for their pupils: “We were looking for a full time deputy but, basically, faced with two candidates of that calibre you have to find a way to employ them both.” (Chair)

“So they came along and told us, said they would like us to share the deputy work but to afford that we’d have some class teaching. It was a better offer actually. We’d enjoyed the day together so that wasn’t a problem. I could work with people I would learn leadership from and also keep teaching. Seemed perfect and it has been.” (Deputy)

The Head brought a thoughtful foundation to this approach: “Although I accept the framework of national accountability and strategies, we read them and fillet them for what might help the staff, I really thought we needed to find an approach which would encourage, allow, the children to want to learn. We could build that around two pillars, PSHE and SEN, with one deputy leading each.” (Head)

“With PSHE we wanted to create a climate for learning. There were no relationships really it felt out of control. If you spoke to the people who had been at the school you got the sense that they thought it was all beyond their capacity. The staff did not believe that they could do it so the pupils did not believe that they could do it, and the staff didn’t believe that anyone else could do it. And some said to us, you’ll never do it.” (Deputy)

The approach to PSHE combined implicit and explicit elements: “We set out, largely the three of us first, to model the behaviour we wanted and it did spread. We would always look calm even if we felt like a panic and we used deliberate words, being positive, praising, and referring to disappointment, ‘we are disappointed with you’. No stickers, just based on intrinsic motivation, behaving because they want to please us and their classmates.” (Head)

“We wrote our own PSHE curriculum and gave it space in the timetable as a response to the needs of the community, drugs and violent relationships. Chances are that they will not leave this community so the emphasis is to teach them about their community so it empowers them with the skills to fulfil roles in their community, to make their community the best it can be. We don’t start by saying if you want to go to university you have to do this or that. It says, this is your community, how can you be a good citizen in it? Once a youngster starts to take control, then they can be ambitious.” (Deputy)

“This is a long term project...we use the language of control and choice a lot with our children, we ask them to predict where their choice might lead and get them to believe they can control.” (Head)

The approach to SEN had its roots in the leadership team’s commitment to inclusive work and a deep suspicion of what their inheritance, two thirds of the pupils on the SEN register and a refurbishment programme designed to create several small withdrawal rooms, meant in terms of bureaucracy and curriculum.

“We decided it was unmanageable to have so many students on the register, with weak targets as well. It was encouraging learned helplessness, children and teachers, dependency on the assistants.” (Head)

“The children on the register now have sharp targets. Every teacher new to the school has help writing IEPs and NQTs are helped for a year at least. By focusing on the learning we move away from the child as a problem towards our work as the solution. It means we think together about the teaching and learning for all the class. We’re on what can be done, not what can’t.” (Deputy)

The school employs a large number of local residents and is as committed to monitoring the work of its adults and supporting their development as it is to its pupils. The governors allocate funds for development activities across the range from NVQ Level 2 to Masters Degrees. The leadership team have been supported by a year long coaching exercise. All of which was summarised quite simply from quite different perspectives: “We offer people the 3Cs: capability, capacity and accountability.” (Head)

“The leadership team go for the very best teaching and learning and won’t compromise.” (Teacher)

## People and relationships

Relationships are at the heart of all that happens at Guildford Grove. The shared expectations of respect, value and dignity are modelled by everyone and all the time: “We pin all of this on relationships. We have to offer a supportive and a challenging environment so all of us learn that we can do things. It starts with recruitment; our adverts always ask ‘do you want to make a difference?’ When people then visit, they might think it is like any other local school but we make sure they realise that it isn’t like that and only looks like that because of the way we work.” (Head)

Clarity about the importance of relationships and the thoughtfulness about their quality permeate the school: “People love working here. If our standards slip, the leadership make it clear, it’s not acceptable and they explain what has to be done to improve. It’s always constructive criticism.” (Family Assistant)

“There is a cultural feel to the school as soon as you walk through the door... There are different levels of leadership that we all feed off, the deputy heads support the head and there’s the leadership team, leadership roles with subject or phase interests, mentors working with NQTS, senior teaching assistants leading the teaching assistants and the students with their school council. There is every single form of leadership and the vision filters through them all.” (Teacher)

“We back each other right across from head, the teachers, us, the lunch time supervisors, the cleaners, backs everybody else up; not because that’s what you’ve been told to do... that’s just how it is, you feel comfortable doing that...” (Assistants)

Like many of the schools we visited the relationships between the adults are an echo of relationships across the school: “It is mirrored, we had an INSET talking about the vision for the school, looking at it for the children and we were saying ‘trust, attitudes, expectations, modelling’. We realised it worked for the children and the adults, it’s the same really, relationships.” (Teacher)

“It’s seamless, the adults talk to one another like this, they talk to the children like this and then the children will do the same. That is how the head wants it and how I speak to you is how I speak to the children. You don’t talk at them, you talk with them.” (Assistant)

One result of that focus on relationships is the Ofsted report’s description of ‘the excellent role models that the older pupils provide for the younger ones [in] a very harmonious community where relationships are characterised by mutual respect’.

“School helped me to learn and to stay calm when Mum and Dad were away. I got really angry; it was hard. I used to take it out on people and it wasn’t their fault. I screwed up my work and thought ‘I can’t do anything’. People at school helped me realise I could do things....Now I feel safe and happy at school and at home.” (Pupil)



## Harrow Gate

### Context

Harrow Gate is a primary school situated to the north of Stockton on the Hardwick Estate, an area characterised on the ACORN Index by predominantly 'hard pressed families', disproportionately unemployed, often single parents, mainly in council terraces. Most pupils at the school come from that area of social housing and national statistics show the adjacent Hardwick ward as an area where every ill-health indicator exceeds national and local levels. This includes teenage conceptions at 60 per cent above national averages, reported ill-health 50 per cent above and children eating fruit and vegetables, a third below. Free school meal entitlement for the ward at 40 per cent almost exactly matches that of the school. Harrow Gate's roll is more than 460 girls and boys aged between 3 and 11, 95 per cent are of white British origin.

The school is a physical haven, three delightful buildings and an attractively equipped play area surrounded by an apparently unforgiving environment. Adults and children are organised into four teams: Foundation and Key Stage 1 teams are based in the Key Stage 1 building; middle and upper teams are located in the Key Stage 2 building; a new sports hall joins the two.

In 2005, the school's most recent, full Ofsted inspection described Harrow Gate's location as one of the most deprived areas of the country. It reported that the attainment of children when they start nursery was well below average, a high proportion took free school meals and 20 per cent had learning difficulties. Overall, the school was judged to be good: children achieved well; personal development and well-being as well as care, guidance and support were described as outstanding. The leadership was good with outstanding features. A more recent theme visit by Ofsted in 2008 was even more complimentary: achievement, curriculum, leadership and management were all described as outstanding.

In 2007, the last available results for our study, the school's results in the end of Key Stage 2 SATS were:

<b>% of pupils achieving at KS2:</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>Maths</b>	<b>Science</b>
Level 4 or above	89%	96%	98%
Level 5 or above	28%	55%	62%

Harrow Gate's CVA score of 103.2 put it significantly inside the top 5 per cent of schools nationally.

The school has a stable leadership team, a predominantly female staff, a male deputy head and a headteacher who has been in post for about eight years.

### Community and culture

The commitment of the leadership team at Harrow Gate to its community and children has its roots in personal experiences, often from personal origins in low income areas. Several of the school leaders told stories of their own journey from now devastated communities, often being the first member of their family to have higher education. There was a strong theme that they had come into education to make an emphatic, positive difference to young peoples' lives, sometimes referring to the inspirational teacher who had opened doors for them. Harrow Gate was the kind of school where that was possible:

"It was a very specific choice I made from teacher training when you realise what you can give as a teacher. I very much wanted to give to children from the estates, from that kind of background. From a very selfish point of view they give you a lot back, they are so excited in what you're giving to them, they're very appreciative in their learning ... Don't get me wrong the [behaviours] are still there like any school. Just that whole part of wanting, readiness to learn because it's something new to them, it's something they feel so privileged to have. In other schools, I found that children just knew they had to be there so sat and did what they were told, you didn't have that kind of little spark underneath it which is what could make a difference." (Key Stage Leader)



“My very first job was in a beautiful lovely school in a leafy lane and I was bored out of my brain because you couldn’t seem to give them anything. You know it didn’t matter what you did, the parents and the children were very ‘of course we should have this’ taking us for granted I wake up every morning loving the thought that I’m coming here...” (Key Stage Leader)

The school’s commitment to avoiding low expectations and patronising contact is visible in the grounds where the new furniture and equipment is left outside all hours, despite the warnings that it would be burnt or broken, if not stolen. Other expectations on the parents are as respectful and high as they are on everyone in this school community:

“Whenever I see (head) she adopts a similar thing to what she does with the teachers: it’s to say ‘this is how it is here and this is what we’re doing for our children and this is the part we need you to play in it as well and we will give you whatever’ but there are clear expectations of parents as well.” (External Consultant)

“We have a tenacity, we don’t let them off the hook. We feel and tell the parents you are partly accountable with us for whether your child is going to be a good reader.” (Senior Leader)

The school works hard to develop connections with the parents and community at large. Communication is almost constant from the moment each new pupil is given a red book bag to take home every evening and return every morning. For the first couple of weeks, the bag is empty and the child’s game is establishing the routine – and then come the books.

Parental surveys show enormous pleasure in the school’s success and satisfaction with its connections with parents and the community. Parents are encouraged to attend the Good Work Assemblies followed by tea a couple of mornings each week and to class assemblies once a week. They are encouraged to contribute as volunteer helpers and one parents group meets to fundraise for the school. The children are regular visitors to the local library, retirement home, church and businesses and were recently involved with the local community group in redesigning the park. Adult Education organises well-attended courses in the school each Wednesday morning. There is a breakfast club for all children from 8.00am and the after school club provides care until 6.00pm and during holidays. The school’s own Behaviour Improvement Team works closely with some of the local families.

The school is convinced that helping parents to contribute to their own children’s learning is part of what closes the gap between pupils here and their peers whose parents are better placed to support them. There is a fine balance though in the roles to be played, even between professional groups: “What I see here is a school which has not become a department of social services. Although they understand the context that children come from and they care about it, they actually use the appropriate agencies well so they’re ahead of the integrated services game in a lot of respects.” (External Consultant)

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

Harrow Gate’s SEF states simply: ‘The school does not accept the factors of the estate as an excuse for poor standards and has very high expectations on pupils and staff’. This an approach which permeates the leadership team’s work.

“We don’t expect anything but the best from them at all times and that’s the same as us. We should be expected to be the best like they are so we all work at that level.’ (Key Stage Leader)

The school’s relentless attention to detail begins with recruitment. Like most in our research, this headteacher will purposefully pursue staff whose reputation is known through hers or her colleagues’ networks. Adverts, the head says, are idiosyncratically phrased (for example around a Sound of Music theme): “To attract the attention of people who don’t say ‘for goodness sake?’ but who do say ‘I wonder what it’s like there? That gets the right people paying a visit.” (Head)

Nothing about day-to-day life at Harrow Gate is left to chance: “A huge detail to us is the consistency across every aspect of the school (Revisiting and re-questioning, is it still appropriate? Is it still the best? Do we need to adapt? Do we need to change?) It’s that questioning constantly along with the consistency and the rigour in emotional health and in the academic side of things.” (Key Stage Leader)

Not only the curriculum, but the layout of every classroom, wall presentations and the decoration of corridors (ceilings and walls) with children’s work is methodically planned and executed. Every child starting at the school is provided, free, with a school uniform (and the red book bag): “Literally, a small price to pay for establishing the expectation and the habit right from the start.” (Head)

Priority and purpose are also vital: “You’ve got to look at what the systems are. There’s no point in having a system for lining up the paperclips every morning and make all the staff have the same system. We line the paperclips up on the table, marvellous, same system, consistent, rigorous but you’ve got look and say what is the point? Is that making an impact on standards?” (Head)

The curriculum balances a focus on the basics with a clear ambition to extend the pupils’ horizons with a range of activity including residential visits, themed topic days out, a Spanish MFL Assistant, music and swimming lessons. The headteacher and leadership team are adept at managing the stream of national initiatives so that they fit into and add to the core of the school’s work. If the positive impact of an initiative is not apparent, it is managed to the sidelines: “Isn’t that about the staff having the confidence to take the ownership of whatever the initiative is and think, right this part will work for our school those bits won’t, but we’ll take the core of that? I think we are good at taking the bits that will work for us and just saying, right we’re not doing that we’re taking this part because this part is right for our children, right for our school and will impact.” (Senior Leader)

“Our leadership team seems to anticipate what changes are coming and we are well-prepared when they happen. No surprises for us – we’re ahead of the game.” (Key Stage Leader)

Given the high degree of management and control implied by this rhythmic consistency and high expectations, the headteacher’s description in the following quote might seem odd if it were not so enthusiastically and unanimously, endorsed by the staff, including support staff: “The people in this school have autonomy, they’ve got responsibilities but also linked to that they’re accountable and they know they’re accountable. That’s the difference, isn’t it? Nobody gets ‘permission’ from me because it’s autonomy, responsibility and accountability.” (Head)

‘It’s also giving us the... not just permission, you know, it’s a two way thing, the head is our head full stop but we feel we have this huge part to play. I feel I could be head of this school when I’m talking about my area. The head is the first to say she is expert at lots of things but not expert at my things. So she takes advice and will act upon it. If I say ‘we just have to do this’ I get listened to and then I get all the support I need.” (Key Stage Leader)

“Until I came here I always felt that I was being led so far along the path but there would always be a lid there. It was like having blinkers on. When I came here it was as if from the very first walk around and I could sort of see a chink of light. I thought as old as I was and as experienced I was, I just had never felt that somebody’s going to invest in me, somebody’s really going to listen to me. All those ambitions that were tangled up inside me, they’ve just gone whoosh, because (the head) just didn’t put a chink, she threw the lid away is how I see it. I think we do that with the young people here, there are no constraints. What do you want to do? How can we get you there?” (Senior Leader)

“We really feel valued. You wouldn’t recognise some of the aspects of the school. We work as partners with our teachers and I for one feel appreciated.” (Support Staff)

The key to this remarkable mix of control with autonomy and accountability with job satisfaction is revealed in the report prepared by Investors in People. This reports the transparency, trust and pride which permeates the processes and describes an approach to:

- operational planning which includes everyone: 'Everyone in the school has some input into these operational plans, teachers, support staff and children are consulted...'
- staff development planning (which includes an interesting commitment to developing emotional intelligence) rooted in the work: 'The staff development plan emerges from the self-assessment processes, self-appraisal, performance management, professional discussions and an annual review by the leadership team...'

## People and relationships

At the heart of Harrow Gate's approach is the quality of the relationships between the adults and children, eloquently summarised in the school's three simple rules:

1. to respect and care for everyone
2. to respect and care for our school
3. to always do the best we can

Much of that quality stems from an approach in which, as in many of the schools in this study, it is not possible to distinguish between the principles applied to the adults and to the pupils. Respect and care for everyone, appears to mean just that. It is, by all accounts, modelled, as far as humanly possible, by the head and school leaders and expected of everyone however young or old. The consequence is an atmosphere in which everyone appears to feel valued and where workload and effort are viewed through an optimistic lens. This is probably best illustrated by these simple quotes:

'You're not perfect, none of us are, you never get everything right all the time, but (the head) does allow us to if we've made that mistake, to learn from and move on to the next level it's never held there, you made that mistake, and it's not repeated week after week. You're allowed to move forward and to learn from the mistake and then move on to the next level which is really, to me as teacher, it's really advantageous.' (Teacher)

"I have to say one of the real strengths of our school is that ethos is in every level of the place where people are at the centre of it and (the head) is the one who inspires us all to be like that. Our children know that it's safe to make mistakes, that grudges are not held they always get a fresh chance." (Teacher)

"(The head) recognises strengths and areas in people, yes, to her benefit to help support her with what she wants to do, but also most definitely for the person themselves and that applies to everyone person in the school as well. Certainly on pupils we do have a great strength in being able to recognise those things that our pupils are good at and we develop that and isn't always academic and it isn't always one thing or another. We do try to develop that and (the head) sets us an example of that and we all buy into that because it makes you feel so good." (Key Stage Leader)

"The day I came... she was very astute in picking up nonverbal and verbal cues I was giving her and I've always said to her she knows how to recognise strengths and qualities in people and to work and to develop them.... it's exciting." (Senior Leader)

'The Headteacher and Senior Management Team set an ethos of respect, this pervades the whole school. Everyone interviewed expressed trust and respect for their line managers and senior managers. (The head) ensures the well-being of every individual in the school. Her enthusiasm and consistent optimism has raised the level of self-esteem for everyone.' (Investors in People report)

## Context

Redbridge is a popular Sports Specialist College serving a large council estate on the western edge of Southampton. There are more than 800 students aged 11 to 16 on roll and oversubscription for the past three years has meant that fewer pupils from outside the immediate area can enrol. Almost all the students are from white British families, many from homes experiencing economic hardship. There is a culture of dependency on state benefits and the school says there are few positive, especially positive male, role models in the community. The local ward is in the top 10 per cent of the most deprived in the country and the top 5 per cent for child poverty. Local levels of crime are the highest in the city.

The school offers specialist, highly integrated support for a small number of hearing impaired students. Ofsted reports confirm the school's own analyses showing that students entering the school in Year 7 have, on average, low levels of literacy and numeracy; many have low language and communication skills. Health data for the area is above average for obesity, malnutrition, early mortality, teenage pregnancy and dental problems. Free School Meals take up stands at 30 per cent although Housing Office data shows a significantly higher level of entitlement. Sixty percent of the students are on the SEN register. The school's CVA score in 2007 placed it at the second percentile nationally with 64 per cent of the students achieving 5A\*-C at GCSE and 31 per cent achieving 5A\*-C including English and maths.

A house system of vertically organised tutor groups has nurtured a sense of belonging and pride during a period of change in the school. The houses provide impetus for the sports college team ethic and its commitment to the physical, mental and emotional well-being of every student. Behaviour around the school is good and though there is rarely more than one permanent exclusion on average each year, there had been none in the twelve months before our visit.

In 2005, a full Ofsted inspection described the school as outstanding, its overall effectiveness as excellent. A theme inspection in 2007, on curriculum innovation, concluded that: 'The overall effectiveness of the curriculum, in terms of meeting a wide range of learning needs, is outstanding.'

## Community and culture

Working at Redbridge begins from the start with an eye on the students' community and families.

"Their background is central to our thinking. I remember very early in my first year at Redbridge, in one of the INSETs, the deputy head really set out the Redbridge culture: that you really have to understand what their lives are like out there, outside this school, in order to teach them well inside this place. When the students walk through the doors they're walking into Redbridge school and whatever else is happening out there, we don't accept any excuse or anything like that.... but we do have to understand it." (Head of House)

"We make it clear at interview that our students are coming from a very narrow working class, white background so working here will not be easy. It does put some applicants off but as a result those who stay are committed to these children." (Head)

The head and deputy head, a close, long standing and deeply influential professional combination, are, like several of their team, from working class backgrounds and place a high premium on staff who are passionate about making a difference for children with few advantages in life and who understand both the problems and the opportunities created by a tough catchment. They have a particular perspective on the connection between the cultures of the school and community: "We've taken the values of the estate and turned them to our advantage. If you ask the parents, they expect the school to teach and to manage behaviour. When we meet parents, we're always asked three questions: 'Are they at school? Are they behaving? Then, often as an afterthought, are they doing alright?' We gain an enormous amount of respect because we consistently make sure everyone knows where they stand and what's expected of them. Those are the very things that do not exist on the estate although they would like them to." (Head)

“We are very aware of the estate coming in to the school, so there’s no question of putting up barriers but working out how we can complement it. For example, parents know that appearance is important but we have to fit that into their values and their affordability. So we don’t have blazers and ties, we’ve tried that in the past and we did not have parent support. So we consulted with the parents and now the students have smart logo polo shirts and sweat shirts, smart in a serviceable, affordable kind of way which the community completely and utterly gets behind.” (Deputy)

This sensitivity to context permeates a staff culture which also avoids stereotypes.

“The white working class is a long way off homogeneous. We have to work more and more intensely as the students go through the school to raise and differentiate their aspirations if we are going to support them; university, career training or straight into a job.” (Head of Careers)

The school has a strong sense of positioning itself in a range of local partnerships and networks, with local universities, sixth form and FE colleges, Southampton Football Club, private sector companies including HSBC Education Trust increasing its capacity to work on the students’ field of vision and range of ambition. Sir Clive Woodward’s visit to the school demonstrated how the school puts strong role models and options in front of the students whenever it can. There is though, a recurring theme from all the adults that success breeds success, bit by tough bit, and that the most important thing the school can do is to show the students that they can individually be successful and that then the school can be successful: “It’s like the Jim Collin’s flywheel metaphor, once you begin to get some momentum results start to improve, local gossip about you starts to improve and it becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. You have students and parents expecting to do well, saying ‘that’s why we chose Redbridge’.” (Deputy Head)

Collins, a ‘management guru’ uses the metaphor to describe how decisions affect momentum in an organisation and how important the small nudges are. Each tiny push in the right direction adds momentum to a flywheel so that it continues to pick up speed; every unnecessary or contrary decision acts as a brake on the flywheel. Lots of small, well made decisions have more impact in the medium and longer term than apparently big shoves.

A flywheel does however need constant attention or it loses momentum and at Redbridge, like the other schools we visited, that is a tenacious feature of the work.

“We have to do the things that parents would do in other places. Whatever the students pitch for, we do whatever is needed to back that. Whatever it takes. I think, ‘what would I do for my kids?’ and if I can, I will. I’ve driven them to interviews before now. It is not easy to find a job of any kind in this area so most will go to FE College after school. The kids are very estate centric and reluctant to travel far; trying to get them onto a bus to travel a couple of miles for work experience is difficult enough. It is a tough estate but it’s the one they know and a kind of protective blanket.” (Head of Careers)

The Healthy Living Adviser, a key member of the sports team, works closely with outside agencies including Connexions and the health service. She can then provide targeted support for vulnerable learners and her work has made a significant contribution to reducing persistent absence. Despite the school’s efforts to raise horizons beyond the estate through a range of visits, trips and encouragements which most schools would recognise, many of the students are not persuaded: “Going to college, most who do, they prefer the colleges which are close and that cuts the options. We’re not happy with the drop out rate but the issues don’t disappear. Their family and community structure doesn’t offer the safety net that others have at college.” (Head of Careers)

The school's community engagement encompasses more than just the student body. It offers fully extended services to the community across all seven days of the week. The Senior Citizens Christmas Party, organised and catered entirely by students as part of a planned learning experience, attracts more than 150 local people annually. Several students are active members of the Young Wardens Scheme on the estate and eight have been awarded the Princess Diana Memorial Award for community service. The school has close links with a local charity for the homeless. Year 9's community enterprise project involves working with local community organisations: "We try to build up the parents too. No child is bad through and through and we're on the phone praising parents when their child has done something good." (Deputy)

## Leadership, teaching and learning

Leadership, teaching and learning at Redbridge are judged by Ofsted to range from very good to outstanding and those are the only criteria shared with staff through the school's classroom observation programme: "I observe every colleague teach on a yearly cycle... In advance I share the Ofsted criteria for good to outstanding and use those in my observation and feedback." (Director of Teaching and Learning)

Redbridge has been a Specialist Sports College since 2003, was re-designated with 'High Performing Status' in 2007 and in 2008 was invited to be a National Support School with the headteacher as a National Leader of Education. The school has been awarded many if not most of the available national kitemarks and achievement awards. The school's sport specialism plays an important part in developing its ethos and an identity characterised by 'unrelenting support, encouragement and optimism'. The curriculum at Redbridge includes the Royal Society of Arts 'Opening Minds' Programme in Year 7. Opening Minds methodically develops skills for learning, relationships and good citizenship alongside the building of knowledge. In addition, the Year 7 timetable is organised to reduce the number of teachers working with each class: "Because of Opening Minds, some subjects sacrifice dedicated time at Key Stage 3 compared to other schools but the students have to enjoy school, to like school. Year 7 gives that start and the skills to build on." (Teacher)

The 'Routeways' approach used in PE is gradually becoming a model at Redbridge for other curricular development. 'Routeways' is based on an analysis led by the students of their preferred PE learning styles. Their analyses are organised into four categories around which lessons can then be planned to match the different styles. The 'Get a Life' programme in Year 9 is focused on extending student enterprise, money skills and citizenship. Redbridge is also working with local primary school partners to create leadership opportunities for its students in their schools and uses its grant from the HSBC Trust to fund leadership opportunities for students on international adventures.

The head and deputy talk about "not just a high level of expectation but also a high level of positivity" to explain the core of their approach: "I genuinely believe that if you keep telling people how good they are and reinforce every positive that is going on then people not only start to believe that situation but they start to act the part as well." (Head)

Their recurring comments about keeping everything simple and clear also emerge in Redbridge's approach to teaching and learning: "Everything is driven by clear, simple systems which everybody can understand and operate. We're aware of the impact that assessment for learning can have on attainment; forget jargon, we mean students understanding what they do to improve their learning. So every classroom has a green sheet on the wall with five basic questions: What have I learned this lesson? How have I learned it? Where am I going next? What do I need to do? How will I do it? It's not rocket science, it's dead simple. If you ask the students what level they are operating at, most of them will give you a blank look. That doesn't matter, what matters is that they can say 'I don't know what level I am at but I do know what I need to do to get better', they know the next step." (Deputy Head)



No aspect of the quality of professional work at Redbridge is left to chance. This attention starts with a methodical recruitment campaign which does not compromise on quality and purposefully scans personal and other professional networks for the right recruits. The approach with staff then echoes the approach with students: a thoughtful analysis of an individual's needs is associated with a strong emphasis on support so that everyone's rights and responsibilities for development can be exercised. Finally the leadership constantly reviews the needs of the school and the people in it to see if it can fine tune the contributions one makes to the other, not least to regularly revive their colleagues' interest and enthusiasm. The school invests heavily in staff development and out of the 30,000 organisations with Investors in People status nationally, it is one of less than 40 which hold Investors in People Champion status. Clearly speaking about students the headteacher creates another of those quotes which, across the schools in our sample, also perfectly mirror the leadership's sense of responsibility for adults: "Increasingly we've recognised the link between learning and behaviour. We are all signed up to what goes into learning activities relating directly to what comes out in attitude and behaviour. An enormous amount of work has gone into learning styles and constructing pathways that better suit the needs and aspirations of the learner. In other words, we are fitting the system to the needs of the learner and not the learner to the system." (Head)

The leadership also believes that like the students, the staff are entitled to have their difficulties recognised and, even more so, to have every success publicly praised:

"It was frowned at my previous school to blow your own trumpet but it's the other way round here, you're encouraged to talk about what you do well. Every Friday in briefing we do 'Learning Friday' when staff are invited to demonstrate an idea which they've developed in their teaching and is working well. Just ten minutes, often with a lot of light hearted banter and people are queuing up to do it: forty ideas every year." (Director of Teaching and Learning)

At least part of that enthusiasm for sharing is rooted in the sense of interdependence and openness about teaching that is encouraged at Redbridge. No man or woman is an island, the work of one impacts for better or worse on everyone so it might as well be for the better: "Everyone is asked to nominate three areas of their practice they feel confident about and one they wanted to develop. That proved difficult for most of us and, for a handful, extremely difficult. We all find it easier to list reams of what we're not good at but we are insecure saying what we are good at. I sat with some colleagues and asked them about a lesson they felt good about and just by talking and asking we could work out what it was they were doing well. Then we organised, it was a best fit, reciprocal, paired observations with someone who demonstrated a strength in the area you wanted to develop in, it was three sessions. It opened the gates, people now feel confident about being in a class with another teacher." (Head of Teaching and Learning)

## People and relationships

"If nothing else comes from your contact with students here today, I would be mortified if the one thing that did not shine through was their pride in the school. It does not matter if they cannot tell you what levels they are operating at and various other bits and pieces but having that pride, that sense of place in the school is the platform for them to succeed in whatever way is appropriate for them." (Head)

Pride, the argument goes, does not come before a fall, it precedes a step forward. Pride is the source of a student's interest in the next learning step and in the ways to take it.

Ofsted described students' personal development and well-being at Redbridge as outstanding. Students develop self-confidence and self-esteem, they value the school's systems of rewards and sanctions and consider fixed term exclusions to be used fairly.

Ofsted similarly noted that all the staff feel valued, they are given clear opportunities to excel and turnover is low. The result is a happy, safe and healthy working staff.

One tactic the headteacher shares is that social information about individual student's interests and achievement outside school are methodically collected and stored for easy electronic access. They can then be introduced apparently casually into passing corridor conversations which boost student esteem and catch the interest of their peers. Or they can be used in other circumstances: "If a student's behaviour, excelling or troubling, gets them through the system to me, I can check quickly on the IT system and start the conversation with something they really enjoy – 'how are your show rabbits this year, any prizes?'. Then I can move on to, "Now, we have a problem to sort out haven't we?" (or a success to celebrate). The message is that you're a person first..." (Head)

The school does not shirk from being direct and honest with the students about the challenges they face and, sometimes, the problems they create: "You have to be honest with them, sometimes brutally honest so they can accept responsibility for their actions and at the same time you let them know that you care and won't give up on them. I will say 'All that matters to me is you, I really care about you and blah de blah de blah.' And I really do care and they have to believe that I care... We are on their case all the time, nagging them. Systems here are very clear; you are excluded if you have fight or if you abuse a teacher. There's no debate, you go. But when you come back, everyone, pupils as well, knows it has been dealt with by the Head. None of the staff would make a reference to it, we all move on and we support them to the end." (Head of House)

This sense, as one teacher described it, of 'valuing everybody and everybody as valuable', permeates the accounts of teachers and pupils: "Students must see that we value what we are doing and value their support for what we are doing. This is really evident with PE clubs. If we don't arrive in time, at 3.30, or worse if we cancel and say 'there was a meeting I had to go to, something else I had to deal with...' they think, he's not putting a value on this. They learn that other schools might cancel fixtures but we don't. We respect the effort we expect them to make so they can respect the effort they expect us to make." (Head of PE)

Students are very confident about their relationships with the adults and with one another. They appreciate the care taken for them, not least the post box into which they can place a confidential note about anything that is worrying them. In two very different statements, students from Years 7 and 8 captured this eloquently:

"There's nearly a thousand students at this school and even with so many the heads of house are good. At our school, 98 per cent of the students, say, are good and willing to learn but you've always got 2 per cent, anywhere you go there'll be a small amount, who cause trouble. If there's like this gang and someone gets at you the rest of the gang encourage him so he can't stop. I'm having problems with some people at the moment winding me up and Miss sorts it out." (Year 8)

"Be respectful, don't be bossy. Listen, treat everybody equal not high rank and low rank, listen and pull people together. That's it for everybody here." (Year 7)



# Robert Clack

## Context

Robert Clack has been a Specialist Science College since 2003 and achieved a second specialism in mathematics and computing in 2007. The school is located on two sites a few hundred metres either side of the busy A112 arterial road in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The sites are used as a lower school and upper school. The school is oversubscribed with more than 1,700 pupils, girls and boys in almost equal number, including a sixth form approaching 300 on roll. While the majority of students, 78 per cent, are still white British, a gradual decrease in that percentage over recent years reflects changes in the local neighbourhood. About a third of the students are eligible for free school meals and 40 per cent are on the SEN register including 5 per cent on statements or at School Action Plus. The school serves an area containing significant deprivation and its intake is drawn from two of the most disadvantaged wards in the country. In 2007, 50 per cent of the students at the end of Key Stage 4 achieved 5A\*-C including English and maths. The school's CVA that year was 1033, placing it in the top 5 per cent of mainstream secondary schools nationally by that criterion. An Ofsted inspection in 2007 reached the same conclusion as its predecessor in 2004 and repeated the Grade One for the overall effectiveness of the school. It judged the school to be outstanding and the students to be making outstanding progress while at the school. The school holds Investor in Peoples status, the International School Award recognising the global dimension of the learning offered to its students and the Sports England Sportsmark.

## Community and culture

The headteacher at Robert Clack, himself from a working class background, is unequivocal about the importance that the local community holds for the school, both as a resource and as a challenge: "Teaching in schools with deprived intakes is difficult and we have to acknowledge that fact, some families can be 'hard to help'. We have to protect the success gained by excellent, hardworking teachers, assistants and students from any atmosphere or occasion of chaos and gang culture in the community. The leadership has to keep that outside the school. The school represents a community moving forward together and we ensure that every group of pupils is doing well." (Head)

To achieve that, the school has created a close and sometimes intense relationship with the students' families and the wider community, continually exploiting opportunities for mutual advantage. The school's 2007 Investors in People review noted that it is at the heart of the local community and has a great impact on everyone in the area. The school's employment of former pupils and local residents is an iconic example of that: eight of the teaching staff have been pupils at the school and many more local people are employed in assistant and administrative roles. There is also a constant encouragement to local people to work as volunteers in the school, often mentoring students. Teachers brought up locally welcome the responsibility and opportunity of being a role model and often refer to the teachers who pushed their horizons when they were pupils: "It wasn't the greatest school when we were here but there were individuals who could inspire you. They were more impressive role models than we can be because they had kept plugging away and inspiring youngsters when it was more difficult. The leadership are now with you." (Science Teacher)

"We have a lot of pupils asking about how we got to be a teacher, asking about courses, where I did my A levels and where I went to University. Some are interested in staying quite local like I did, but not all." (PE teacher)

"The idea that because you're from Dagenham, you can only do a low paid manual job is out of the window. I had a Year Nine pupil, who when I was talking about university said to me that he was going to be a builder just because he came from Dagenham. That's not acceptable, he can choose to be a builder, but he doesn't have to be because of where he comes from. He can see I'm the proof of that." (Science Teacher)

“For most, they would still be the first person to go to university from their family, I was. Their parents will have left with no qualifications and if they are doing alright no-one sees past that. Students then say that they can’t go to university because their mam can’t afford it. I can explain that it really doesn’t have to be like that and they can believe me.” (PE Teacher)

“That’s not to say that teacher from other backgrounds can’t do this, they do. We’re all made very aware in the induction year about the backgrounds that we’re dealing with. We have to understand where they’re coming from and then show them ways, after a difficult weekend say, this is how we are going to overcome this. We don’t accept the outside as an excuse.” (Business Enterprise Teacher)

The school is an active, visible supporter of community regeneration and has accepted a leading role in the national government’s Local Enterprise Growth Initiative for Barking and Dagenham. Its impressive sports facilities which are open to the public outside the school day include sports and activity halls, dance studios, fitness suite and a range of outdoor, floodlit courts and playing surfaces.

Appearance is an important part of the school’s presentation of itself to the community:

“We want to appear, literally, physically as a ‘beacon of hope’ which means constantly being alert to what the place looks like, well painted and in good condition.” (Head)

School uniform is part of the same message: “Looking smart is not restricted to the middle classes, everybody knows what smart looks like and what it stands for. And, yes, we do want to present ourselves in the best way, and to be part of the same identity – not least because of the prejudices there are out there. It helps us to convey our standards and avoid people exercising their prejudices about students from round here.” (Senior Leader)

“When I was here, there was no school uniform, you’d not be stopped for having your shirt out but we pay attention to that sort of detail and makes sure that all the teachers are applying the same standards in the same way.” (Enterprise Teacher)

This is not lost on the students: “You know where you stand because they apply the rules. Like uniform: we have to dress in blazers and ties, to cover your top shirt button. And the teachers have to be smart too. Every male teacher wears a tie, I think they have to. They set an example, to dress for business.” (Pupil)

The school’s strong connection with the community, using its assets and resisting its dangers, is also recognised and acknowledged by the students: “They go out of their way to make things good for us. They show respect and are loyal to the school. They talk about it in a good way and they perform as they should as teachers, that’s being loyal.” (Pupil)

“Teachers here work really well with the PTA to raise funds and they do things for the community.” (Pupil)

“Parts of this area are really bad; they have a bad reputation... that’s not reflected in the school, you’re not going to be attacked in here. You can feel safe; there are no bad areas inside the school.” (Pupil)

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

Students at Robert Clack achieve outstandingly, according to Ofsted, because teaching, learning and the curriculum are of such a consistently outstanding quality. Further evidence of that was the school’s designation in 2007 as a High Performing Specialist School and its award of a second specialism. The high quality classroom work is supported by good data analysis which allows senior and middle leaders to identify and respond to areas of underperformance, for example in some Key Stage 3 areas and in the Key Stage 4 attainment of girls who had reached Level 4 at the end of their primary school.

To encourage students to realise and achieve their potential, the school has a personal mentoring programme and a wide range of other activities and initiatives to support groups and individuals. Every effort is made to ensure that domestic circumstances do not prevent any student from joining in the school's extra curricular activities across the arts, drama, music and sport. An illustration of the school's determination not to tolerate stereotypes from the community is the boys' dance group encouraged by a visit from a professional male dancer. There are organised trips abroad, including to Barbados, Canada, France, Germany, Russia, South Africa, Spain and the USA. Visits to universities give students a taste of life outside the immediate environment they know and trust: "If you have to move, it would be hard, I grew up here and I don't know anywhere else but if you have to do it, you have to." (Pupil)

The head is, the Investors in People report confirms, a role model of the behaviour required. His style is open and honest, respectful, consistent and approachable: 'others follow his lead'. He believes that the quality of teaching and learning in a difficult school is not negotiable – it has to be very good all the time. "The most important thing for the students is to have a good teacher in front of them, someone they can respect and who respects them, so that teaching, learning and behaviour improve hand in hand." (Head)

Staff recruitment and development at Robert Clack are careful and methodical. In an area which does not easily attract job applicants, current students and local people are encouraged to think about working at the school. Attitude and the passion to work with these students are as important at interview as qualifications and previous experience. The induction programme, which includes a weekend conference, is thorough and supportive. Staff are encouraged to share and to try out new ideas. Professional development activity is encouraged and sponsored, coaching and mentoring are a frequent contribution to that. That context allows for a monitoring and appraisal process which is rigorous and challenging, and at the same time widely appreciated. The outcome is a shared sense of purpose across an effective staff focused on learning and students.

Respectful control is perhaps not a phrase that is used at Robert Clack but it does characterise so much of the interaction between staff and students around their shared work. Teachers talk about the value of constant affirmation and praise alongside the importance of managing behaviour: "We always have a positive association with everything, taking a positive attitude, promoting success and achievement, in sports and arts as well as academic and in effort too....it's the progress and effort that is recognised, not just praising the people who get A grades, it's for doing your best." (Science Teacher)

"In my classroom, the first time I meet my students, I show authority because I believe in the strong leadership, that's the school ethos. If you are too relaxed in the beginning and too friendly then the pupils will try to get away with things and you have to play catch up. So I come across in the beginning as tough but we have respect for one another and I very rarely have issues I can't deal with myself." (Female Teacher)

Students appreciate this approach, it makes the school a safe place and then a place for learning: "There is a good sense of control and they let you know they are in charge but they also care, celebrating what you do well and doing things outside the class for you and it makes you feel part of something." (Pupil)

Asked to describe the staff 'at their best', a group of Key Stage 3 students produced the following: "Strict, awarding, helpful, fun, control, determined, powerful, patient, determined, control, strict, organised and fair." (Pupils)

They want on to explain:

"Strict is a good thing really because they want you to learn." (Pupil)

"Lessons are like well planned out and we always get on with our work. It's quiet in the lessons and that's important because you want to learn and get grades. (Pupil)

“The lessons are a good balance between learning and enjoyable so you don’t register lessons, you look forward to them.” (Pupil)

Finally and decisively:

“[The head] is top dog. His team have it sewn up” (Pupil)

## People and relationships

The most striking feature about Robert Clack, says its Investors in People report, are the people: ‘They are enthusiastic, passionate, motivated and want to do a good job. Senior managers are held in high esteem by staff and there is warm praise for their approach and accessibility.’

Staff and students alike believe it is the quality of the senior team that is the major factor in the school being such a great place to work: “I’ve worked in a few schools and never one where the staff works as hard as this. There is a lot of humour, we are a happy staff and a happy school. The fact that we do well, we know we make a difference that takes a lot of stress off.” (Senior Leader)

The sense of shared endeavour is important to the headteacher and provokes another of the references to respect which recur constantly in conversations around the school.

“We seek to guarantee to pupils and parents that they will be treated with respect and that we expect to be treated with respect from them in return. You can’t impose that kind of approach, it has to be agreed and then carried out by the school community. That involves shared discussions and establishing a collective vision for the school. Then you have to work at that, find time for the concerns that come into school with the students and their families, their difficulties and aspirations. Always involving the pupils in any discussions that affect them and taking their views seriously even if, maybe especially if, you disagree and need to explain why it has to be our way.” (Head)

“Once parents saw that their children were in a school with an atmosphere of respect and professionalism, and with a culture of discussion and negotiation, they could support the school and its culture.” (Head)

The 2007 Ofsted report says that ‘the all-pervading atmosphere of respect between students and adults underpins the school’. The report confirms the value of older, sixth form, role models around the school and the pride students take in expressing and having their opinions acknowledged.

A group of Key Stage 2 students captures this aspect of relations between staff and students in their replies to the question: What are staff here like when they are at their best? “Influential, intelligent, strict though they can joke, strict but fair, good humoured, kind, caring, generous, fair, loyal, compassionate and outgoing.” (Pupils)

Students say they feel safe in school and that the year based, pastoral system creates a ‘family like’ community in the school. Staff also pick up the same theme, even in their own relationships: “We work hard for one another. If I had a problem I could ask about it, I know I’d get some help. Someone would help me check out what was wrong and work out what to do, to support me. Saying that, it is just like the students, we intervene to help.” (Teacher)

The consequence is a virtuous circle which everyone can believe they are creating: “Success is less to do with the uniforms and assemblies it is because we treat students with respect and care about them...” (Senior Leader)

“Why is this a good school? It’s respect that we hold in the teachers and the teachers give back to us.” (Pupil)

### Context

St Mary's is a Voluntary Aided Catholic Primary School serving the parish and wider community of Saint Mary's, Workington in Cumbria. It is a 4 to 11 primary school with 143 children on roll. One third of students are baptised Roman Catholics and some students travel from surrounding areas to attend school because of its religious affiliation. Children attending St Mary's come from a range of backgrounds, but there is a skew to those from lower socio-economic groups. The school's Ofsted inspection in 2006 reported that it serves a disadvantaged neighbourhood where significant number of the students face difficulties in their lives and all the pupils were of white British heritage. The school draws students from the wards of Moss Bay, Harrington, Workington, Seaton and Distington. Four out of every five of the students come from Moss Bay, a 'deprived' ward where 20 per cent of births are singularly registered to their mothers. More than half of the local households rent their property from the local authority or housing authority. According to the Department of Work and Pensions, 82 per cent of the local families are classified as category 5 or 'hard pressed'.

St Mary's school has won various awards over the past decade including a DfES achievement award in 2002, an Ofsted 'Gold Star' award in 2003. The school is accredited with healthy school status and has the sports kite mark 'Active Mark'. The school is also recognised as an extended school, providing a preschool breakfast club from 8:00 (about a third of the pupils attend this activity) and after school club until half past five. A voluntary management company operates a pre-school facility on the school site and it is expected that children attending there will feed directly into the reception class, ensuring stable school rolls. The school is well resourced with a strategic and a twelve monthly action plan. The school has enough resources "to keep things ticking over" but relies on gaining grants from the Diocese for significant developmental work. This year the school has been awarded £250,000.

Standards on entry to the school are below national expectations but by the end of the autumn term most children have been 'boosted' up to the expected standard. This is achieved through close liaison with pre-school providers and an intensive induction programme for parents.

### Community and culture

Between 2001 and 2006 there was a complete turnover in staffing at St Mary's with the exception of one teacher, a teaching assistant and the secretary. The current staff have worked relentlessly to involve the community within the day-to-day running of the school. In an area where parents may have had a poor experience of education themselves and feel the school or education system did little to help them, this is recognised as a challenging task. An important driver of this wider community involvement is the Catholic ethos that guides the work of the school. The headteacher spoke passionately about her commitment to the children and how 'spirituality' within the school is an important component of the school ethos:

"How we treat each is important. The spirituality within the school is a very important part of our ethos... They're [students] well supported in school and I think that is about the Catholic ethos."

One teaching assistant speaks about the high levels of genuine care for the students:

"They come here and they're so valued and their achievements, not just academic achievements. The holistic development of the child is very important. It is just such a good atmosphere in the school and a very caring one. Everyone the teachers, the governors and the staff – they all care."

The ethos is important and appears to provide a sense of calmness and order that permeates through the school. All staff interviewed speak about the importance of listening to children in order to understand their needs, motivations and anxieties. Equity is an important construct within the school community; people are treated fairly and respected as individuals. This feature is evident in staff, students and their families. The school has also made a determined effort to provide children with experiences to broaden their horizons and challenge their assumptions. Recent visits have included trips to Hawes End where the children went 'ghyll scrambling' and excursions to London to visit museums and an overseas trip to France. In an attempt make the trips inclusive as possible the school is keen to engage in fundraising activities to subsidise trips and also draws on the Diocese for support.

## **Leadership, teaching and learning**

The 2006 Ofsted inspection judged the headteacher's leadership to be outstanding. The senior staff know the students and their families well and have chosen to work in this context: "I thought I had more to offer a school like this than a school in a leafy suburb. I do tend to enjoy a challenge." (Headteacher)

On arrival the head made a number of changes to announce her commitment. Refurbishing the staff room, for example, provided an early signal that things were going to change and the staff were worthy of a better environment than a barren room with a broken chair and an old classroom table. The head commented: "You have treat people respectfully." Reflecting that: "You can't just let people sit down in those conditions for the 30 minutes they have away from the children all day."

Improvements included the installation of new comfy chairs a new table and microwave cooker. As a leader the head demonstrates tenacious commitment and expects the same from her staff. She also demonstrates how she values people.

"I do work terribly hard. Probably too hard but that's the nature of the beast... If I do a job I want to do it properly. I want to make sure everyone is on board and to make it happen."

The head is also a good listener and encourages staff to contribute to the development of the school. One teacher commented:

"This is someone you can suggest things to. And she's taken it on board and prepared to act on it... so you felt as though your voice was being heard... and she was someone that had experience, nursery through to Year 6."

Continuing professional development is an important aspect of the work of the school. For example, all staff attended an Inset day reflecting on the successes of the 'big writing' project. One teaching assistant reflected:

"We were involved in it, our opinion was valued and we all set targets for next year. It was good for us to be involved because we're working alongside teachers."

Teachers are expected to develop their practice and bring in new ideas and share them across classrooms. This is an important feature of the school and the headteacher has deliberately appointed three NQTs to bring in fresh ideas and new approaches. The headteacher pays particular attention to monitoring progress of students and ensuring consistency of practice across subjects and year groups through regular book reviews and provides cover for subject leaders to conduct the book reviews on a half termly basis. One teacher remarked:

"Everything gets fed back to her so she knows what is going on and if there are areas of concern then but I think things are. Things are monitored so often that if there is an issue you can hone in on it very quickly. But the way it is done is very open and it does not get that point."

Staff at St Mary's do not have different expectations of students from different backgrounds. Teachers resist the temptation to pigeon-hole or generalise about students. A teacher revealed the high expectations, how she believed the environment engaged children from all backgrounds and that some of the students from the poorest, most challenging backgrounds were like: "little sponges... and that background and home does not come into it. The government put three points progress in the foundation stage. Well, we put four points into it."

Staff believe it is the role of the teacher to create a community where everyone can achieve and every child has an appropriate programme of study. Decision-making processes and teaching practice are tailored to individual need and based on reliable data used to place children into performance groups. These groups are reviewed every half term so that no-one becomes 'stuck' in a particular group. 'Underachieving students' are identified and provided with additional support through reading intervention or programmes such as spring-board maths literacy. It is the class teacher's responsibility to manage the 'on track' group, providing differentiated extension activities that are monitored during book reviews. There is also a 'gifted and talented' group who are set a tailored programme of study designed to stretch them to achieve their full potential. A teacher reflected: "So every child in the school is individually put into these groups and then planned for."

Children are closely involved in the process of target setting. Every half term a teacher looks at individual attainment in the foundation subjects. Targets are agreed with the child and written in the front of their workbooks in child friendly language. They know whether their current level and what they need to do next.

## People and relationships

St Mary's is a relatively small school so each member of staff needs to hold a range of responsibilities, including several curriculum areas. This places high demands on the teachers. In addition, each member of staff contributes one after school club each week. In total the school runs 10 clubs over the week. This is considered to be important because it allows staff to develop strong social relationships with students in a less formal environment. One teacher commented on the high level of interaction the headteacher has with students and how she also managed to keep an appropriate distance, thereby maintaining the respect of the children:

"The time she gives to the children. She's very much hands on... And I can say to the little ones 'do I have to tell Mrs Pearson?' And even although she is lovely with them, there's still that element of don't tell Mrs Pearson. And that's difficult to do."

In addition to investing in teacher-student relationships the headteacher is determined to work closely with the parents and reflects on how hard the school had worked on bringing the parents in:

"We've worked really hard to get the parents into school. To teach them how to read to their children and how to write with them.... It wouldn't matter what parent wanted to see me they would get to see me and my work would wait till seven o'clock in the evening."

Staff also visit the family home of students during the students' first term in reception class. This is considered as an important element of the induction process and also serves as the foundation of developing strong and trusting home-school relationships, serving to break down barriers from a very early stage. The school operates an open door policy where parents can come into school and express their concerns or discuss issues immediately. This is perceived as a very important principle because it responds to issues as they arise rather than allowing them to escalate within the community. Again, the headteacher commented: "We do not let things fester or escalate... We find that parents respond very well to that. They don't have to wait a week for an appointment."



Furthermore, the school does not restrict itself to within school issues. If there is a case of bullying on an estate and it comes to the attention of the school, the head will get involved in tackling the issues: "You can't put your head in the cloud and say this is nothing to do with me. You have to help resolve the situation."

There is the understanding and acceptance that if you don't intervene it will only be a matter of time before the issues does manifest itself within school. In summary, this vignette has the work of this school underpinned by respectful, caring relationships within an open and honest environment where people are comfortable working together and comfortable working with and listening to children. A member of the senior team summed it up:

"We have a shared ethos and vision. It is important that all children are treated equally and listened to. If you get down to their level they have issues and concerns that not many people listen to... this is very important in this type of area."

Everyone at St Mary's is convinced that without the underpinning values that permeate the school, it is unlikely such strong relationships with a diverse range of stakeholders or the high levels of commitment could be sustained over the long term.



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The Learning Gateway is a single access point to all NCSL's online learning tools and resources. It provides access to talk2learn, a vibrant online community of over 120,000 members. **[www.ncsl.org.uk/learninggateway](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/learninggateway)**

The Tomorrow's leaders today campaign is about finding, developing and keeping great headteachers. **[www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/tomorrowsleaderstoday)**

ECM Leadership Direct is an online resource exploring the implications for Every Child Matters for schools and school leaders. **[www.ncsl.org.uk/ecmleadershipdirect](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/ecmleadershipdirect)**

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