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## THANET SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT GROUP EDITION

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Editorial

Nicki Leggatt

All of the articles in this edition are written by members of the Thanet MA in School Development group. When set up in 2006, this group was unusual in including members from a range of schools, both primary and secondary, within Kent's selective system, meeting first in school and later at Broadstairs campus. This presented us with challenges, some purely organisational (to do with meeting locations and timings) and some at a deeper level to do with different cultural norms, improving our knowledge about other types and phases of school, and tensions between loyalty and criticism. It also presented great benefits, and the group gelled into a unit which valued the multiple perspectives, depended on the mutual support, and out of which friendships grew.

As Maggie says in her piece, *"I have benefitted greatly from engaging in professional dialogues" in the group, where the discussion "has been stimulating on both a professional and personal level"*.

Most members of the group have now completed their final dissertations and as always at this stage, as their tutor I feel a mixture of pride at their achievements, sadness at the loss of their inspiring company, and privilege at having had the chance to work alongside them as they grew. The final word comes from our External Examiner who says that their work *"...represents an excellent example of workplace and work-based learning outcomes at their best. The impact on the teachers and their schools is immense"*.

We hope you enjoy reading these accounts of practitioner research, teacher-led development and professional and personal journeying and discovery.

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# **From personal research project to changing school culture:**

**'How can I improve the quality of learning and understanding in my classroom through talk?'**

*Maggie Poulos*

*St. Peter-in-Thamet Junior School, Broadstairs, Kent*

## **A brief snapshot**

St. Peter's is a three form entry junior school. The ethos of the school has changed over the last ten years. It has changed from being a school that was undersubscribed due to its reputation for poorly behaved pupils and for having a high percentage of children with special educational needs. There was also a lack of parental support, and the school's Parent, Teacher and Friends Association (PTFA) struggled to organise events with so little support that eventually it disbanded. Although the percentage of special needs was high, we also had a reputation for good special needs support. However, this meant that parents of more able children considered

that we did not support the more able child. Consequently, more able children tended to go to another local primary school whilst we tended to have children who needed extra support with their learning.

We have worked hard to change our reputation. We still have a good reputation for supporting children with educational needs, but we have also concentrated on raising attainment and consequently now have a growing reputation for providing both academic and emotional support. A new behaviour policy, that I helped to formulate and implement, has also had a big impact on the behaviour in the school. This has resulted in far less disruption in class and an increase in the standard of behaviour throughout the school. We run a breakfast club and an extended day. We have achieved a Healthy School Status and Quality in Study Support. We now have a strong PTFA and a Projects Committee who have recently won a lottery bid to encourage parents to come into school and work with their children on projects. Our current project is 'Around the world in parent days'. Parents and extended family are invited to take part in workshops run by professionals and activities include camping in the school grounds overnight to learn about the Native American way of life, a European day and Italian cooking lessons. These events have been enormously successful and, I am sure, will raise the profile of the school within the local community. Children and parents have commented on the positive impact these days have had as an enjoyment factor for families and for the school's reputation.

## **An outline of my research and development work**

During the course of my MA studies I have been looking at the role of formative assessment within the primary school. This has involved developing the different aspects of formative assessment such as the regular use of success criteria and peer and self-assessment. This developed into my final Masters project investigating talk in the classroom. I wanted to find out how to improve the quality of talk and thus improve the quality of learning. However it is not that area of my research that I focus on here; it is the other issues that evolved from this that I found equally fascinating, but not as straightforward as my original research. The issue of how we manage change and colleague collaboration is something I believe most teacher researchers will come across. Although I found it challenging, it has allowed me to consider the impact research can have, the changes that we all face, and to gain a deeper understanding of how we can work and grow together.

I was beginning to see that although my research would be valuable to me and I felt I could implement these changes, it was not going to be as easy as I first thought to restructure my teaching to encompass them. I would need to think carefully about planning opportunities for talk and to remember to change the way I respond to questions in the classroom. I feel that even though my research has been successful and there are a lot of practical ideas, information and theory to support my findings, it is all too easy to slip back into old familiar ways, particularly when feeling rushed and under pressure. If I felt like this, what would it be like for colleagues who had not done the research, seen the value of it and therefore would lack the commitment to implement it? When discussing the importance of talk in the classroom, Corden (2000) refers to an Inspection report (HMI 1985:5) which states that:

...good practice more often depended on the initiatives of individual teachers than on the existence of agreed school policies.

(Corden 2000: 43)

I still needed to find ways in which staff would accept these changes and incorporate them into their everyday teaching.

## Successful initiatives

Research from the General Teaching Council (GTC) highlighted an unnamed school which had carried out staff training and produced a five year plan to implement effective talk. Teachers there had been willing to reflect on their teaching styles and had been prepared to go on a long learning journey themselves. This was after holding reflective discussions from watching themselves on video. Researchers analysed the discussions to find out what beliefs teachers held about talk in the classroom. I feel that our staff would find this method too intrusive and would be against any such research, particularly in light of the fact that they showed no interest in peer coaching which I feel would be far less intimidating. However, I also watched a clip on Teachers TV about dialogic talk at South Milford Community Primary School in North Yorkshire. Alexander (2006) describes dialogic talk as ‘talk that harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend pupils’ thinking’ and advance their learning and understanding. The clip showed how videoing a lesson helped a new teacher to identify where she started using open questions and then turned them into closed questions. It helped the new teacher to understand the importance of talk. In fact, the teacher who was mentoring also videoed her own class and then played it back to them so they could see the value of dialogic talk in their lessons. For me this raised the question: why do we find it so intimidating and threatening to be observed or videoed? This is a familiar feeling for me as I always feel uncomfortable when I am being observed, partly because when someone is watching me I start to analyse everything I am doing and find fault with it.

Another approach was to use the Teacher Learning Academy (TLA) which is part of the GTC (see GTCE 2010). The TLA helps schools and teachers to focus on professional learning that is practice-based. It can help to make Continued Professional Development (CPD) more effective. The key features of the TLA are:

- The challenge of professional learning for teachers.
- TLA acting as a stimulus for a change of culture.
- Linking TLA to action research and performance management.

In the particular case study I focused on, a training day was held to raise the profile of teacher learning and to show how it could develop minds and attitudes as well as careers. Abbey Junior, the focus school, believes that making a link between professional interest and the future direction of the school empowers the teachers. The school management was restructured and the school divided into areas, with teachers being assigned to responsibilities in these new areas. From this study it is acknowledged that teacher learning has an impact on classroom practice. I knew this to be true from my own experience. The research I have carried out has had a tremendous impact on my teaching methods and on my views.

I could see that the TLA contained lots of possibilities to develop collegiality. It would certainly be worth putting these ideas before our management team to discuss the implications and feasibility as it would mean a major restructure to incorporate it.

## Theories of change

Colleague collaboration is imperative in order to introduce and sustain change. In contrast to the idea above Claxton (2007) believes we can make these changes with small adjustments:

The key to educational reform does not lie in grand structural changes, ...It lies in the cumulative adjustments of these small, specific cultural signs and of teachers’ daily habits... And it requires vigilance, to stop new ways of working from being eroded and subverted by old habits.

(Claxton, 2008: 167)

As I stated earlier, it was small adjustments to everyday teaching that I was initially looking to achieve in order to erode old habits and develop sustainability. However, I have not, as yet, been able to see how to encourage staff to make these small adjustments. Throughout the course of this research I have continually felt encouraged when staff reacted positively to recommended changes only to feel disappointment later when I realised that these changes have not been maintained. Durrant and Holden (2006) state that the reality of school life is that it is 'complex and messy'; they also acknowledge how difficult it is to find opportunities to engage in collaborative activities due to the 'multiple demands on their (teachers') time, skill and energy' (p.145).

I can see how the method outlined by Abbey Junior School links to Fullan's (2008) theory that you should invest in a person's capacity building linked to results. Indeed Fullan believes that if his steps to change are followed then you end up with 'a critical mass of colleagues who are indeed learners' (p110). He believes that 'building on individual and collective capacity' is vital.

From my research I feel that I have understood the importance of talk, and in particular dialogic talk, in the classroom. It has been simple, straightforward and enlightening. However, the issue of being able to encourage staff to incorporate it into their own teaching has become a complex issue. There is no one size that fits all, as a reductionist theory might imply. Rather, all schools are different and have evolved, over time, their own culture. Although at this stage I am not sure which is the best way forward, I do feel that I am aware of the situation, the complex issues involved and possibilities for change in the future.

## **Implications for the school**

I realise now that I need to be involved in finding ways to increase colleague collaboration. There have been several ideas that I have briefly looked at with examples of how to increase the levels of participation within a school. These ideas will need to be discussed at management level. However, I feel that whichever direction our school decides to take, that I have increased my own capacity to lead change. This is the area that I believe the school needs to focus on, our capacity to change, both collectively and as individuals. I know that our head teacher has recently drawn up plans that are similar to those of Abbey Junior School, but it is in the very early developmental stages at present. This is what I understand distributed leadership to be about. It involves high levels of involvement from all of the school community: parents, pupils, teachers and governors. I believe that it is encouraging staff to see themselves as learners that will also make the difference. First we need to acknowledge and understand the existing culture. As outlined in the introduction, this culture has been in the process of change over the last ten years. I see the next steps in our capacity building as a continuation of this change. We now need to choose carefully the next steps in our development to increase and sustain change at the level of teaching and learning.

Part of the change is to strengthen the relationships between colleagues. I feel that in our school we do have good relationships to build on. This year I experienced changing year groups and feel this is one way to encourage stronger relationships - by finding ways for us to work with different colleagues. This was also encouraged by two of our teachers from different year groups meeting regularly to develop the creative curriculum. Harris and Lambert (2003) suggest strategies that are effective in increasing the capacity for change. One of these is building a culture of enquiry, which means:

...to establish structures, groups and roles that serve as the infrastructure for the self-renewing processes of a culture of enquiry'

(Harris and Lambert, 2003: 95)

These plans that are in the developmental stages would, I believe, establish these groups within our school. It would allow teachers to reflect on things from a new perspective rather than trying to adjust current practice which is difficult to sustain.

Harris and Lambert (2003) explain that it is those teachers who recognise that enquiry and reflection are important processes in the classroom who are the ones who find it easier to sustain improved change. I believe that the teachers at our school already have these skills; they now need to begin to express them in professional dialogues with colleagues in order to work together.

## **Development of pupils**

I can see how using talk and ensuring pupil to pupil interaction has increased the children's confidence as they realise that they do have an opinion. It is also developing their thinking. It has increased the experiences that develop knowledge of learning which in turn encourages them to become more confident learners. It has also helped improve their social skills as they listen to, and value, each others' opinions. I can see that continued use of this type of talk will lead to them becoming more self-motivated and independent learners. I believe that it is by giving children the opportunity to interact with each other and to explain what they think, that they begin to formulate and understand what they know.

## **My professional development**

My research question 'How can I improve the quality of learning and understanding in my classroom through talk?' has taken me on a long journey. It has allowed me the opportunity to scrutinise not just my teaching but my viewpoint of teaching. It has been a journey of discovery. I have indeed found that I can improve the quality of learning and understanding through talk. I have also discovered how rewarding and stimulating this is, not only for the children in my care, but also for myself. As my confidence has grown in using talk I have found more opportunities to engage my pupils in worthwhile discussions and debates. I have also learnt that I need to be patient, as it takes time for colleague collaboration to develop and for change to take place. Reflecting on my own values and opinions has helped me to recognise and understand the values of my colleagues. I can now understand and appreciate why we, as teachers, often find it difficult to take on board new initiatives. This is something I would not have reflected on had I not been involved in this research and development work. It has helped me to put the disappointment and frustration I experienced during this research into perspective. I also acknowledge that I would not have developed my understanding of formative assessment to the degree that I have. It would still have been a personal interest but not one that I would have tried so hard to implement across the school.

During the course of my research I have benefited greatly from engaging in professional dialogues with other research colleagues. Discussing educational issues within a group has been stimulating on both a professional and personal level.

## **Implications for the future**

Following our head teacher's observations I have been asked to do some demonstration lessons for colleagues who need support in implementing formative assessment. I have also been asked to become involved in a project with Canterbury Christ Church University, working in conjunction with our literacy co-ordinator and trainee teachers. My area of the training will be in formative assessment. I have also just taken on the role of Gifted and Talented Co-ordinator and can see lots of opportunities to investigate talk and asking higher order questions to promote understanding.

I can now see so many opportunities to encourage 'talk rich' learning across the school and my aim now is to develop these opportunities.

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## The National Challenge – A Success Story?

*Sarah Morgan*

*Hartsdown Technology College, Margate*

When I accepted the role of director of mathematics in June 2008 at Hartsdown Technology College I knew it would be a challenge. I welcomed it. The mathematics results had been significantly under target for several years. I was confident that my determination and love of mathematics would be infectious and impact positively on the school.

I had not foreseen the introduction of the National Challenge and the impact it would have on mathematical attainment at the school, but from the onset I welcomed it. Its introduction would bring about improvement in the teaching and learning of mathematics; this was a personal concern highlighted by government enquiries. Secondly it would directly support my sole target of significantly improving the mathematics results. Attainment in English and Mathematics became the priority on the school improvement plan.

### **The support of the National Challenge**

It was in October and the lead up to our early entry mathematics GCSE exam when I realised the true capacity of the National Challenge to assist improvements in mathematics. I asked if I could have money to supply revision materials. I asked for £1000 for reward incentives for students gaining early entry mathematics. I asked that

my team have a day off timetable to teach intensive mathematics revision. Not only was the answer 'yes' but I was held up as a model of good practice. I had anticipated barriers to all of the above as there would be an impact on other teachers and lessons. However, the National Challenge had removed these barriers.

Subsequently, I began to realise just how far the National Challenge would assist me in raising the mathematical performance at Hartsdown Technology College. I had joined the school with the sole aim of improving attainment in mathematics and I was completely dedicated to this purpose. The National Challenge meant that I had a whole team of professionals and experts to support this vision.

### **Against the National Challenge**

Initially I felt I was in the minority of people in favour of the National Challenge. The general consensus seemed to be that it brought about unnecessary pressure with a benchmark of 30%, with no justification of how and why it had been set. I appreciated the comments of Liam Nolan, head teacher of Perry Beeches Secondary School, when he asserted:

*If the National Challenge brings me a string of advisers, I don't want anything to do with it. If they give me cash to hire more English and maths teachers so I can reduce class sizes, then I'll have it.*

*(Freaan, 2008)*

It is true the National Challenge did bring advisers:

*The support available includes the recruitment of National Challenge Advisers, to work with the schools, from existing School Improvement Partners or heads with 'a track record in improving low attaining schools'*

*(Riddell 2008 p.72)*

However, it also brought funding:

*The National Challenge has a budget of £400 million, of which £20 million is for National Challenge Advisers, £20 million for other leadership support, £100 million for teaching, learning and study support (the tailored programmes).*

*(Riddell 2008 p.72)*

Riddell (2008) is critical in his discussion of the National Challenge. Although acknowledging it will bring about improvement in attainment in pupils leaving school with five A\*- C including English and mathematics he states that improvements were already in place without the introduction of the National Challenge.

*The National Challenge is not necessary for some of the 638 schools identified for the June launch which had not achieved the 30 percent target by 2007. The number not achieving the 30 percent had been 1610 schools in 1997 and, after all, the general trajectory of schools' results has been upwards and is likely to continue that way.*

*(Riddell 2008 p.75)*

I disagree and feel that achievements in English and mathematics need to be at the top of a school's priority list. The introduction of the National Challenge has acted to ensure this. Critically, however, he highlights a key concern. At what consequences will these

improvements in English and mathematics be made? He describes the National Challenge as a short term “fix”. Certainly a major concern is its sustainability. It remains unclear what will happen when the funding ceases.

Despite being a highly controversial initiative, the National Challenge is also completely fascinating and politically and socially relevant to my role and responsibilities within an institution which falls below the “floor target”. Subsequently, this framed my decision to conduct my research on the effects of the National Challenge at my school.

### **Strategies implemented because of the National Challenge**

The school received £95,000 and twenty days worth of support from a National Challenge Advisor. Funding for schools varied in Kent from £20,800 to a staggering £223,000. The funding seems to have little relevance to the school’s prior achievement. The data regarding funding is publically available from [www.kent.gov.uk](http://www.kent.gov.uk). Schools also received varying levels of support from a National Challenge adviser, ranging from 10 to 20 days.

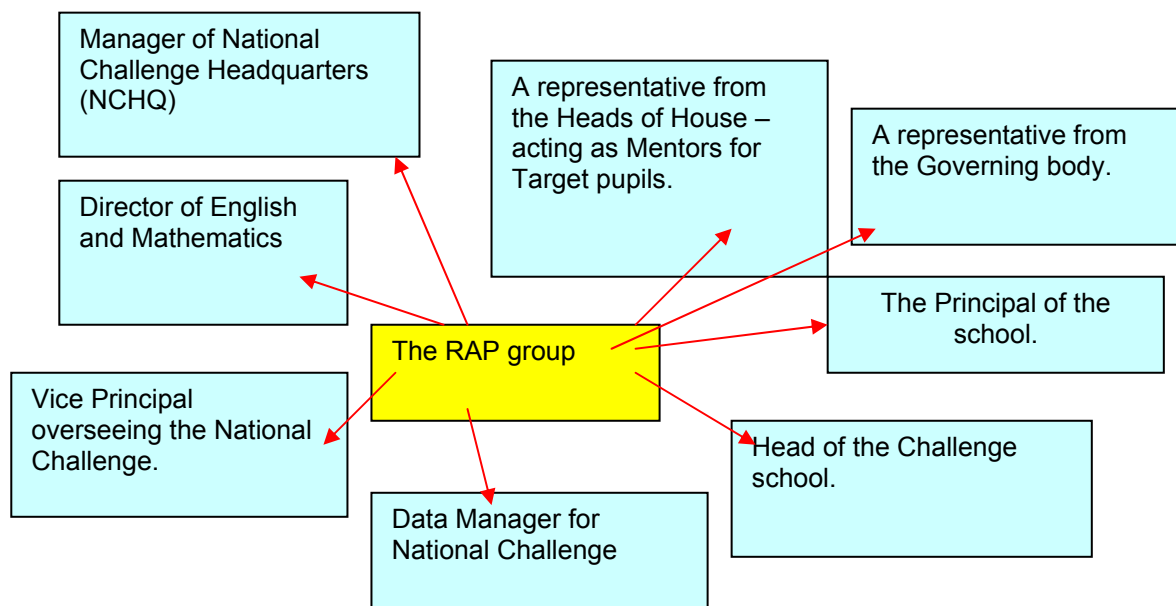
In their bids for funding, Kent schools were asked to list how they would spend any money received, and responses included:

- Additional high quality English and mathematics teachers
- On site homework facility until 5pm
- Improved exam preparation
- Restructuring the leadership team
- One to one tuition
- Peer mentoring
- Support from Advanced Skills Teacher
- Higher Level Teaching Assistants
- Additional study days
- Additional Teaching Assistants
- Improved use of data
- Observation skills
- Easter revision provision
- Electronic Assessment
- Federation with a Grammar school for support
- Implementing Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) to ensure the curriculum matches student needs
- Appointment of attendance officers

*(Carter, 2009)*

### **Hartsdown Technology College’s response to the National Challenge**

The response has been set out in the Raising Achievement Plan (RAP), composed by the National Challenge coordinator to empower the RAP group in their collective objective of raising achievement in English and mathematics. It aims to link key people in the school to raise achievements.



I do not intend to discuss the whole school initiatives here but it is important to know that whole school initiatives were implemented and supported by the creation of the group, and that they played a part in the improvements. However, I am focusing purely on the changes we made in mathematics and the impact these had on results and student evaluations. The strategies that were implemented in mathematics included:

- Gap analysis sent home to the parents and carers of 'target students' and this information used during the regular mentoring sessions with Heads of House, pupils and their parents/carers.
- Reward incentives such as a raffle with gift voucher prizes, a bowling party and a trip to a theme park.
- The introduction of mathematics tutors working with small groups during lesson time for more quality learning.
- Focused revision during holiday times and intensive days before terminal exams.
- After school activities.
- Early entry GCSE mathematics resulting in smaller groups as pupils who secured a C grade were able to cease studying the subject.
- Extra mock exams for more accurate assessment and tracking.
- Intensive study week

### **Were the strategies successful?**

The school celebrated surpassing the benchmark by achieving 32% of pupils achieving 5A\*-C including English and mathematics in 2009. This was an unexpected achievement as an optimistic prediction had been set by the co-ordinator at 28%. Projections from school data suggested the benchmark would not be reached until August 2011.

The improvement from 20% to 32% is outstanding and we have been named as the second most improved school in Kent. The result in mathematics was the best in over seven years with 43% A\* - C grades, and improvement of 14% from the previous year, and made with a year group where ability was reported to be lower than the previous year group. An explicit focus on the benchmark C grade may have culminated in a deterioration of the grades achieved by students in the upper and lower ability spectrums. The table below illustrates that there was an improvement in attainment

across the board. The percentage of those achieving an A\*-G grade increased from 84% to 98% and ten pupils achieved above a C grade, an increase from three pupils in the previous year, demonstrating that attainment was significantly higher than in previous years. I feel that there is a direct correlation between this marked improvement and the development of the intervention strategies implemented in response to the National Challenge.

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Target for % of pupils to achieve A* - C in GCSE mathematics	33	30	38	35	25	36	35
Target for % of pupils to achieve A* - G in GCSE mathematics	98	98	98	96	98	98	98
% of pupils achieving A* - C in GCSE mathematics	25	14	24	23	25	29	43
% of pupils achieving A* - G in GCSE mathematics	91	94	96	90	94	84	98
Number of A*	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Number of A's	2	1	2	0	2	0	1
Number of B's	14	10	3	6	7	3	8

### **Which strategies were the most successful?**

The intervention strategies have proven to be successful, however it is very difficult to analyse which strategies were most successful. Wenger (2005) writes that peeling away at success to give credit to individuals could have negative connotations.

*Dissecting a creation in order to assign individual credit can easily become counterproductive. To celebrate our efforts and our achievements, we need not become blind to the social fabric that makes them possible.*

*(Wenger 2005 p. xiii)*

This idea mirrors my own experience. For example, one of the internet based revision sites identified one pupil who had not been identified by the target list. This student spent numerous hours revising through the site. I approached this child and offered extra support. The child went on to exceed their target grade. Although many pupils did not find the internet based revision valuable I know this resource helped at least one pupil to achieve. I have numerous examples of where individual strategies helped individual pupils to achieve however it was the combination of all of the strategies working together that impacted on year eleven attainments at GCSE.

One of the key factors to our success was the motivation of the students and the staff to achieve their targets. I observed that the intensive study week had a motivational effect on all those who attended. The motivational impact of the study week is reflected by the results from the student evaluations.

### **Did the National Challenge have a negative effect on the enjoyment of learning mathematics?**

In my research question I articulated that it was important to evaluate the impact of the National Challenge on the experience of the year eleven pupils as well as the attainment. I felt it was important that the overt focus on achieving a C grade in GCSE mathematics did not lead to a deterioration of enjoyment in the subject. Although it is extremely difficult to evidence the enjoyment levels of pupils in mathematics I am

confident that the profile of mathematics was raised. The attendance at afterschool sessions increased dramatically throughout the year. Additionally, applications for A level mathematics were also recorded to show a dramatic increase suggesting that more pupils expressed a desire to continue learning mathematics. Through informal discussions that were not recorded for the purpose of this research many students expressed enjoyment in mathematics re-enforcing the idea that enjoyment levels did not fall as a result of the National Challenge.

Riddell (2008) questions whether the National Challenge serves as a short term solution to a long term problem. Essentially, this concept identifies the wider idea pertaining to the sustainability of the improvements achieved under the National Challenge. Undeniably, the funding available afforded many benefits. The funding formed the backbone to the intervention strategies enabling the school to purchase human resources in the form of tutors and other much needed resources. If this funding was stopped then many of the intervention strategies would also come to an end as the school budget could not cover the cost of these interventions.

In discussions with the National Challenge adviser, I asked if we would continue to receive National Challenge funding in light of surpassing the National Challenge benchmark of 30%. The answer was that continual improvements in attainment would affect the status of the school currently considered 'high risk' and result in funding being reduced.

Ed Balls (National Challenge 2008) suggests that schools have responded positively to government support. Why then would this support stop if a school demonstrates continual improvement? Improvement suggests that the funding and the advice have been effective. Accordingly, this leads me to question whether the National Challenge schools are at risk of being victims of their own success?

## **In conclusion**

Although the sustainability of the National Challenge is questionable, I feel that it has highlighted a key concern, the quality of teaching and learning in English and mathematics. In 2009 at Hartsdown Technology College there was a 14% increase (equating to 28 more children) leaving school with 5A\*-C including English and mathematics. In my opinion, the National Challenge acted as a significant aid to help influence this level of improvement within the school.

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# Investigating the impact of different teaching and learning styles:

## a reflection on some methodological and ethical issues

*David Burney*

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I have been teaching in a boys' selective grammar school (where selection is for years 7 to 11 only) for the last 17 years. The sixth form, though, is non-selective and open to both sexes. In this presentation, I examine the idea that different teaching approaches suit different types of sixth form students in different ways. There are different styles of courses offered to the academic mixture of student catered for in the sixth form. Academic subjects can be taken in combination with the more vocationally-orientated applied subjects.

### **Aims of the Research**

Over a number of years, I have noticed that students in these different subjects appeared to prefer different learning strategies to tackle their individual learning activities. The study I undertook looked at how these students rated four types of teaching approaches (Formal Authority, Demonstrator, Facilitator and Delegator) borrowed from Kolb's learning circle (1976). This was then compared with the way that the students said that they preferred to learn, using Gardener's nine Multiple Intelligences as the basis for this study (2006).

### **Method**

I used an action research method to investigate how two different sets of students, one following a traditional type 'A' level and one a newer style vocational 'A' level, each cope with the different styles of teaching offered to them. I also asked them to complete a quick assessment on learning styles to see if any sound correlation could be found between the way that students say they learn and the style of teaching that they prefer. The first major issue to be settled was how to decide on a definition of teaching styles and then compare it with an acceptable definition of different ways that students learn.

It is certainly difficult to investigate with any certainty what impact the quality of teaching has on individual learning. There tends to be greater emphasis on assertions made in propositional terms and claims that have been 'tested' (Eisner, 1988). It is quite an evocative picture that Eisner paints when talking about science (where ideas can be proved) as compared with art (where they cannot). The role of teacher deals with many aspects that cannot be measured, therefore it is difficult to examine which aspects of learning can be attributed as solely the property of the student.

A further problem presented itself when I started trying to evaluate the likely impact that changing teaching styles have on the quality of learning that is instigated. Hopkins (1989) points out the personal focus and potential threat of evaluation, noting the importance of a 'fastidious' approach, observing ethical procedures with care and humanity rather than legalistically.

The idea of self-reflection is central to action research (McNiff, 2002). The self-reflective nature of action research is well documented (Barret and Whitehead, 1985; Kemmis, 1988; Bassey, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; McNiff, 2002). I was very much interested in finding out how the students themselves view their own learning process and then comparing their own views with my own observations. As McNiff (2002) and Reason and Bradbury (2001) argue, 'first person' research relates directly to our everyday personal and professional lives. This action research addressed the ability of 'me' as the researcher, to foster an enquiring approach to my own working life as a person who has direct influence on how people react to the stimulus that I provide for them in the classroom. I hoped through this to be able to improve, long term, the quality of the learning experience that I provide.

The personal emphasis is also a central theme driving forward the government's strategies for learning and teaching and enforcing the 'Every Child Matters' agenda. The focus in most schools has been on teaching over the past years, based on the assumption that getting the teaching right will lead inevitably to the student's learning being improved. Recent government documents such as 20/20 Vision (DFES, 2007) and Higher Standards, Better Schools for All (DFES, 2005), have signalled that there is now a change in emphasis. It is now the 'child' that is to be the focus of our attention, we are asked to personalise learning strategies so that learning is now child-centred.

## Carrying out my Action Research

Barret and Whitehead (1985) propose an action research framework, which focuses on a process of reflection to promote change and enhance professional learning. The authors' framework, which is outlined below, was later adapted by McNiff (2002).

1. What is your concern?
2. Why are you concerned?
3. What do you think you could do about it?
4. What kind of data could you collect to help you make some judgement about what is happening?
5. How would you collect such evidence?
6. How would you check that your judgement about what is happening is reasonable, fair and accurate?

Having identified the relationship between subject choice, teaching type and learning style as my main concern, I tried to follow the above framework throughout this enquiry. There are also other concerns that I needed to take into account in conducting my research. Schon (1991) notes that a practitioner will tend to set a problem that he is able to solve. This indicates a potential flaw in our studies for school development, that is, we are all in danger of falling into the trap of setting up a study which is guaranteed to find just what we are looking for and this will potentially bias our investigations. By this, I mean that we are likely to interpret a great deal of what is found as supporting our basic ideas, even when other interpretations also exist.

However, Schon goes on to say that practitioners will seek to understand and change the situations in which they are working. This gives me hope that, even though the results found may not be the exact questions that are being investigated at the outset of the enquiry, the actual findings may well show something valuable in their own right. This, hopefully, will then enable change and improvement in the effectiveness of our planned and actual teaching in the classroom to take place.

Coultas (in Cole, 2008) argues that effective teachers see themselves as effective learners; we are not the finished article but always need to evaluate and change practice. Change is part of the political umbrella under which we must all shelter, especially as new announcements on education reform come regularly from central government. This has inevitably led to resistance from teachers to yet more change, so asking my fellow teachers to adapt their teaching strategies may well be met by resistance in some quarters. Fullan (2001) suggests that no change can be sustained unless it is supported by management and the infrastructure is in place for the change to be instigated; this affects the wider impact of my study.

Reflective teaching is described in Pollard & Triggs (1997) as a dynamic process involving monitoring, observing and collecting data on their own and their students' 'intentions, actions and feelings', evidence

which must then be analysed and evaluated to enable the sharing and decision making that leads to teachers' action. This supports the framework explained earlier (Barret and Whitehead, 1985), for reviewing and undertaking real practical research which enables improvements to be investigated and acted upon. Vital in this reflective process is teacher judgement based on self-reflection and educational insight (Pollard and Triggs, 1997). This inevitably meant that my professional judgement was central to the way that I conduct my research and also to how I interpreted the results of it.

I investigated several sets of sixth form students, to see if there was any discernable pattern that I could identify with the relatively small number of students. One of the problems with choosing small groups is that it does not provide a large enough sample to enable me to have a great deal of confidence in the quality of the results. There are also ethical issues to consider with the timings of my own study that must fit in with the students' own exam cycle. I had to set a time for my experimental approach to teaching which would disadvantage the students the least in terms of preparation for these external exams.

This study also touched on some of the issues related to the influence of participation in students' own learning and how important it may be for students to take ownership of their own learning (often cited as one of OFSTED's key criteria for identifying good teaching practices). Booth & Ainscow (2002) explain that active engagement, collaborative learning and shared experience are important ingredients in learner participation. It was important, in this study, to discover some of the students' own views on how they see this partnership developing. I also decided to keep a reflective journal during the study and this provided me with the opportunity to cross-check the quality of my research with what I thought I was seeing at the time of my regular observations. This helped me with the interpretation of what I have discovered on my journey.

An experiment allowing the year 13 students to sample different teaching styles was undertaken. At all times the students were kept informed about the different teaching styles being used and how they may suit different preferred approaches to learning. At the end of this period, the students were asked to complete two questionnaires, based on teaching styles and preferred learning structures, and I then analysed the results.

It was always important to take into account the ethical issues that relate to protecting individual rights, namely seeking the participants' agreement, preserving their anonymity and gaining their permission to do the research. Cohen et al (2000) note the researcher's all-inclusive obligation to protect participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of data. As a researcher, I have a responsibility to protect particular individuals because insensitive handling of their attitudes and observations may damage the trust they put in me. Before I asked anyone to volunteer to take part in my interviews, I explained, fully, the reasons why I was asking for their assistance and I asked for their permission to use any relevant information that they provided, solely for the purposes of the research. With the questionnaire, I enclosed a covering letter requesting their permission, explaining the purpose of the research and the relevant ethical issues relating to protecting individual rights and preserving their anonymity. By adhering to good ethical practices, I was able to maintain the good relations and the sense of rapport between all that took part. Throughout this enquiry, I kept the participants fully informed of its progress and brought each participant fully on-board with the aims of my research to ensure that they gave honest views as to how they really felt.

## **My reflective journal**

Throughout the length of this study, I relied on the comments made in my reflective journal. I used this as an important point of reflection and it became part of my decision making process. I have been able to make a note of the little moments of reflection that I have observed the students making and I have also been able to keep a record of the 'light bulb' moments that most students occasionally show, sudden demonstrated moments when a key concept or important idea is really understood or when a perceptive connection is made by a student with the material that they are studying. In my journal I was able to observe how some individuals can still find their own enlightenment and can exert considerable influence upon me at times. For example, it was in the middle of an unrelated discussion on the influence of changing interest rates on other parts of the economy that one rather shy member of the group came out with a very revealing comment. This showed that she had obviously thought a great deal about this complicated subject and gained a true insight into some of the workings of a real economy.

## Reflections on the results obtained

The actual results I obtained were initially disappointing, as they did not come up with any discernable patterns. I did feel, however, that it was important that I had tapped into the honest and perceptive views of my teaching colleagues and also the personal views of a number of the students. It was interesting to observe how each student has been influenced differently by their home and school environments. I am left with the feeling that isolating specific teaching and learning influences on each person was far too large a task for just one small-scale study. For me to identify the main influences on each student, I needed to find a way of isolating all the other major influences on them. I have, in this study, not tried to tackle these influences as it would have proven to be too difficult a task in the time and space available for me to conduct my research.

What do I feel I have achieved and learnt? I do think that the data I gained lends a limited amount of support to my original hypothesis that preferred teaching styles correlate with choice of subjects in at least a minor way. The various comments I made in my reflective journal lend a great deal of support to my original feelings that there was a relationship here. I do have to allow, though, for the potential of my own bias influencing the way that I write down my reflections. I am aware that I am more likely to make a note of an incident that supports my feeling rather than one that may contradict it.

I did not, though, find any identifiable connection between the chosen teaching style and a student's preferred learning style. This may be due to the relatively imprecise Multiple Intelligences questionnaire used or it may be due to the relatively small numbers that completed the survey or due to some other reason. Time, unfortunately, did not allow me to follow up this part of the study and I will need to investigate it further at a later date.

As the study progressed, the need for triangulation became important so that I could maintain my confidence in the validity of what I had discovered. Cohen et al (2000) note that while validity in quantitative research is achieved through careful sampling and processing of information, validity in qualitative research is achieved through the 'honesty, depth, richness and scope' of the data and the care and rigour in the researcher's approach. This has assisted me in trying to validate my research findings. By crosschecking the survey results with my observations, the interviews and my journal comments I have been able to place a good deal of confidence in the validity of my findings despite the limitations of my study.

The most useful part of the study, for me personally, has been the supporting information gained from the reflective journal, my observations and the interviews. This has allowed me to reflect a great deal on my own personal approach to teaching and learning and will also allow me to pass on my reflections to my colleagues.

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# Reflections on Action Research

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The following is an excerpt from one of my first Masters assignments. It was an account of the first piece of action research I had conducted and I found it quite difficult to understand, even though I understood that the idea of action research is to work towards practical outcomes, creating new forms of understanding and developing a deeper understanding of how forces interact. It makes sense in terms of intent, as action without understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless. However, what action research was in terms of a discrete methodology eluded me, as did even accepting it as research.

Enquiry into student learning has typically been in the domain of educational psychology where the researcher's role is generally that of an outsider. The traditional methods used might be laboratory experiments or observations in classes of learners and their teachers and the interplay between. The main difference with teacher action research is the insider role of teacher, where it is possible to make the enquiry more sensitive and responsive to subtle details that may

otherwise go overlooked. This has to be a major advantage over and beyond more traditional types of research.

Action research has enriched my ideas about what serious research can and should be. Kincheloe (2003) urges teachers to become researchers and his writing regarding this can be motivational. He has very strong views regarding education and sees the current state of research as a place where teachers are 'studied down': those who control research inform themselves about their subordinates (mere practitioners) and later using the information to manipulate and control them.

Kincheloe feels that if teachers become involved in research, they will be able to liberate themselves from the standards imposed upon them by outsiders. He believes that teachers can revolutionise their professional practice through research by viewing themselves as potentially the most sophisticated research instrument available.

Previously where I have had doubts about the credibility of any research I would have needed to be convinced by the nature of the evidence presented. In action research I still grapple with the notion of what actually counts as evidence. It has been put to me that the point of a piece of action research is not to prove anything; the most any research account can really do is to allow the researcher or reader to take a fresh look at their own work.

Kincheloe (2003) believes that both teachers and students will benefit from teachers conducting research. He makes a special point to defend qualitative research as a valid science and makes it clear that qualitative research is the best way to study humans in their natural setting. Teacher researchers need to understand the myth of Archimedes, the belief in an objective body of knowledge unconnected to the mind of the knower, to help formulate how educators conceptualise research. The myth assumes that the knower knows the world of education and its students and teachers objectively. Even traditional science, although it strives to be, is not totally objective. However, in my mind the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are on a continuum and whenever possible any research should be driven towards the former.

Although I do hold distinct positivist leanings, I realise that a perfectly objective and measurable world is not really an option. I recognise that all research is mixed with subjectivity regardless of how honed the researcher's capacity is to be detached and analytical. I do however consider issues of validity and reliability to be extremely important with any piece of research and am still undecided as to how these criteria apply with action research. What is it that I have actually achieved? If I'm not sure that my research is reliable and valid then how can I proceed with my findings? Am I in a position to advise colleagues to use the techniques to bring about change and improvement? Should I really be making policy changes within my department on teaching and learning practices?

I still hold to the idea of validity as something that should be crucially important to action research if it seeks to make significant contributions to knowledge. Nevertheless during this research I have become more of a deconstructionist; while I accept there is a real world out there I'm not sure it is always knowable in any objective sense. I think we are always dealing as blind men with the elephant. In action research, my understanding is that it is precisely our different views of reality that are important to understand so that from time to time we can step out of our own ways of seeing and entertain alternative interpretations. In this sense maybe truth should not be what we strive for, but rather seeing the issues in our practice with new eyes. It has been quite a journey for me to reach this perspective.

Horkheimer (1971) argued that truth is an active process where human beings apply it and bring it to power. Verification of ideas does not exist in mere laboratory experiments. He concluded that truth is found in 'a moment of correct practice'. From this perspective the truth and validity of research must be proved in practice, linking with ideas on 'praxis orientated' research. According to Hirst (1974), it is possible to distinguish between theoretical and practical fields of knowledge. A theoretical field is concerned with constructing knowledge of the world, while a practical field is concerned with acting on the world and changing it. Praxis is a movement to bring together theory and practice in a dialectical engagement leading to 'informed and

committed' action. In praxis the ideas which guide actions are just as subject to change as action is, the only fixed element is phronesis, the disposition to act truly and rightly.

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FORWARD OR BACK? [continued from back page...]

I came up with descriptions and the following week discussed them with the same colleagues, and then with other members of staff, from senior or experienced teachers to NQTs. (The names I used came from the positions used in the sport, but the definitions that I devised did not link to how those positions are expected to play the game.) I defined the staff groups as follows:

### **Forwards**

These teachers embrace change and new initiatives. This does not mean that they follow them blindly, but they appreciate the reasoning behind them and want the school to be at the forefront of innovation. This is a large group of our staff, though few of them are 'old-timers'.

### **Backs**

These teachers have generally been in the profession for a long time and feel that changes and initiatives are negative and often fads. They want to do things 'the old way' and have the adage 'if it worked in the old days, then why change now?' These staff may once have been Forwards, but they have become cynical as a result of too often following a new idea, only to find that it was subsequently changed or replaced.

### **Centres**

These members of staff could be described as sitting on the fence. They have no strong opinions one way or another. They are influenced by those teachers who speak loudest, whether Forwards or Backs. Some Centres attempt to be Forwards, but in practice they can end up going around in circles and give up on progress.

### **Wings**

These teachers are on the outskirts of the main body of staff. They tend to do their own thing and seem unaware or disinterested in what is going on. They can be regarded as mavericks by other staff, but often they simply wish to teach their classes without worrying about school plans.

It was important to note that staff could move 'positions' depending on what aspect of change was being introduced. I didn't want to suggest that once you were a Forward you would always remain a Forward – after all, even in rugby union some players are able to play in a number of positions.

## **Final Enquiry – looking at the impact of the National Challenge in Kent**

My final Masters enquiry involved investigating how some secondary schools in Kent had responded to becoming part of the government's National Challenge. In 2008, the Schools Secretary Ed Balls announced that by 2011 all schools would be expected to have at least 30 per cent of pupils gaining five or more GCSEs at A\*-C, including both English and mathematics. Since then, the controversies behind the National Challenge had been regularly reported in the newspapers. How were schools responding in order

to achieve the floor target that had been set? I hoped this would provide me with an idea of what successful strategies were being employed, something that I could then feed back to my school and to any others who had contributed to the research or who wanted to read my enquiry. I hoped this would help my school and others improve upon their 2008/2009 results. I observed how our senior leadership team began to set out a series of changes to the way that the school was organised, and I wondered if this was as a result of the National Challenge or merely a coincidence. I wanted to look at other schools to see if there had been variation in the choices made. This led me to keep a timeline of events at my school and also to start keeping a note of the strategies used.

The National Challenge followed on from the earlier London Challenge launched in 2003 (DCSF, 2009). It set out a 30% "floor target" for all secondary schools in London, stating that any schools that failed to achieve this would be subject to intervention. The floor target was effectively a measure of minimum output to be achieved in a period of time. It was clear from reading the press releases and statements on the government websites that the London Challenge was seen to be a success. It was then expanded to encompass all secondary schools in England. I also noted that one of the pledges in the "Vision" of the London Challenge was to more than double the number of academies open in London, from 34 to at least 70. This introduction of academies was another aspect of the National Challenge that many teachers that I spoke to commented upon, many feeling that it was a way of the government reforming the schools in favour of academies 'by stealth'. Academy schools had been introduced by the Labour government in 2000. They were directly funded by central government and beyond local government control. Many received additional support from personal or corporate sponsors.

According to the DCSF National Challenge data sheet (DCSF, 2008), Kent had 33 National Challenge schools in 2008/2009, more than any other local authority in England. This number was out of 96 secondary schools, and meant that 34% of schools in Kent were in the National Challenge, higher than any other non-urban local authority. There were teachers who felt that it was unfair to compare what they perceived as like with unlike. Secondary schools in these areas were still expected to achieve the 30% floor target even when the top percentage of students were in grammar schools, and many felt that non-grammar schools in selective areas should not have had the same expectations placed on them as comprehensive schools did in non-selective areas. According to a news article on the BBC news website, in 2003 88% of school children went to comprehensive schools in England overall. In Kent, that number was 30%.

I have mentioned that there were negative emotions expressed towards the National Challenge, but there was also a favourable response from some people involved in education. I spoke to staff at my school and others locally who believed that the National Challenge meant that teachers were making a much greater effort to help students to pass the two key subjects. This was vital for many future career paths, including going into teaching itself. This tied in with the government push to 'raise standards'. However, it was noticeable to me that when I did an internet search looking for articles in favour of the National Challenge I struggled.

The lack of articles praising the National Challenge could perhaps be explained by the fact that people who are against something are likely to be more vociferous in their disapproval than those who are satisfied. It may be that after the National Challenge has run for a number of years there will be more comments made in its favour. However, even newspaper articles discussing school success in achieving the floor target have had a negative 'spin' to them.

### **Using the rugby analogy**

The response of the teaching staff to the National Challenge was largely positive. For some of the staff defined previously as 'Forwards', there was an immediate move to investigate what improvements could be made and what strategies could be employed in future. Centres also seemed to look at the National Challenge as an opportunity rather than as a punishment for the school. For the 'Backs' there was cynicism over the National Challenge, with some staff remarking on it being another fad or a way for the government to introduce more academy schools on the quiet. Other 'Backs' questioned whether it was part of a ploy to end the existence of grammar schools. However, it was soon obvious that the Backs were in a minority and, unlike in previous years, they found themselves very much isolated. The Backs were almost entirely composed of staff who were approaching the ends of their careers and some immediately chose to announce their retirement or give up their position within the middle management of the school.

### **My personal development**

I consider that this Masters programme has caused me to look at educational matters in new and more detailed ways. This particular enquiry led me to feel that I was being more of a researcher than a teacher as it did not directly influence my day to day teaching, despite the huge impact the National Challenge had upon my school. I found that my familiarity with the subject meant that I was spoken to frequently throughout my research by members of staff who were keen to discover if I had found any new strategies that had been successful elsewhere. Along with the senior leadership team, I was seen as something of an expert on the workings of the policy. As a result, I found my self-confidence growing in a professional capacity. In fact, this increasing self-confidence and greater awareness had been noted by members of my senior leadership team throughout the three year Masters course, although it was not something that was revealed to me until my performance management meeting.

Increasingly, I have been asked to contribute to school development projects and to help in forming new policies. I have been pleased to be able to give my opinion and look at ways of moving the school forwards. As a result I am definitely a more motivated member of staff than I was three years ago, and I feel that I am in a far stronger position to affect positive change in my school.

Interestingly, after I had handed in my final submission, an article appeared in the Times Educational Supplement entitled "Which tribe are you?" (Ritchie, 2009). This shared similarities with my concepts, though the terms and ways of defining the groups

of staff were, I felt, more attention-grabbing: the Eager Beavers, The Lefty Liberals, The Jocks, The Cynics, and The Bullies and Backstabbers. I would equate the 'Forwards' of my analogy with the Eager Beavers, but the other categories show more variation – the 'Backs' fit in comfortably with aspects of both the 'Cynics' and the 'Lefty Liberals'.

To develop my analogy a little further, I investigated the idea of constructing a continuum, looking at the response of teachers to change. I felt that I definitely moved from being close to the 'Centre' to being at the 'Forward' end of the scale. I feel that many of the staff at my school have also moved in this direction from wherever their initial positions would have been, partly as a push for survival.

Back ----->----- Centre -----> ----- Forward

(Wing – does not fit onto this continuum...)

I now see myself very much as a 'Forward', though I suspect I always was.

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# Forward or Back?

**Dave Morgan**

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As part of an investigation into the effects of change on my school, I was considering how to categorise 'types' of staff. I started off in the usual manner, doing an internet search to see if any similar ideas had been considered previously, but I wasn't very successful in finding anything that I felt was applicable. Dr David Kiersey described people as having one of four temperaments in a 1978 book called 'Please Understand Me' which he defined as Guardian, Idealist, Rationalist and Artisan (Kiersey and Bates, 1978; Kiersey, 1996). Although some of the descriptions did fit individual members of our staff well, I felt that they were not really applicable for group descriptions. I could see that within my school there were 'clans' of like-minded individuals who could have a big impact, especially when it came to a change to their working practice. I felt that examples that I researched did not describe groups of people, but individuals.

As a result, I decided to try to formulate my own definitions for groups. This was on my mind a lot, so much so that I had something of an epiphany on a Friday evening when socialising with some fellow teachers at a local pub. I discussed my ideas with them and the fact that I used the phrases 'forward-looking' and 'backward-looking' was pointed out to me. Being a typical Welshman, these words led me to think of rugby union, with its various positions, and I decided to pursue this line of thought.....

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