

# Action research for school improvement

Studies on able, gifted and talented learners,  
homework and white working-class pupils

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## Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to Richard Churches for supporting the schools and teachers who were involved in conducting the research and for providing literature reviews on each of the three themes within this publication. Thanks also go to the seven schools involved: Stamford Queen Eleanor School, The Deepings School, Ely College, Oxford Spires Academy, Danum Academy, St Mark's Church of England Academy and Mount Street Academy, and to the teachers for taking on research activity in addition to their teaching and school responsibilities.

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# Introduction

This report is based on seven action research projects undertaken by teachers in CfBT academies in the school year 2012/13. The schools received research support that included training in research methods and undertook a small-scale research project within one of three thematic strands. Schools chose the themes for their research themselves and these reflected key strategic priorities. These were:

## **Theme 1: Able, gifted and talented learners**

### **1.1 Exploring the use of transactional analysis to develop able pupils' collaborative working**

Emma Lupton (Stamford Queen Eleanor School)

### **1.2 Lessons from the evaluation of a gifted and talented programme**

Christopher Cox, Nick Lefley, James Baird-Parker, Andrew Hart, Daniel Walker, Olivia Schelpe and Charlotte Strenge (The Deepings School)

## **Theme 2: Homework**

### **2.1 Cross-curricular homework: how does it impact on attainment, engagement and teaching?**

James Waters, Sarah Kupski and Sam Craven (Ely College)

### **2.2 Homework: strategies that work for us and our students**

Patricia Thornhill, Rebekah Finch and Joanne Dunphy (Oxford Spires Academy)

### **2.3 The changing face of homework at Danum Academy**

Angela Moore, Debbie Calver, Lyndsey Dyer, Rachel Elliott, Sarah Higgins, Steve Richardson and Laura Saunders (Danum Academy)

### Theme 3: White working-class pupils

#### 3.1 Engaging white working-class pupils at St Mark's Church of England Academy

Joanne Isiramen, Gifty Ghansah, Thomas Slatter and Daniel Stevenson (St Mark's Church of England Academy)

#### 3.2 Raising the attainment and achievement of white working-class pupils

Becky Malam (Mount Street Academy)

In addition three literature reviews were conducted by Richard Churches on each of the thematic strands. These provided the schools with the theoretical and research background in the area of their particular study.







## Theme 1 | Able, gifted and talented learners

Two studies were conducted in the thematic area of able, gifted and talented learners. The first was undertaken at Stamford Queen Eleanor School and the second was carried out by The Deepings School.

Stamford Queen Eleanor is a secondary school for boys and girls aged 11 to 16 years. For students towards the top of the ability range, there is a programme of accelerated learning with the option to take some of their GCSEs in Year 9 (at 13–14 years of age) with an enrichment curriculum of additional qualifications available to them in Year 11.

The Deepings School is a mixed 11–18 comprehensive school with close to 1,600 students on roll. It became an academy in February 2012. The Deepings gifted and able register provides three broad cohorts of pupils – the able (the top 40 per cent of pupils); the gifted (defined through the use of National Curriculum assessments and teacher recommendations, and linked to performance in specific subjects); and the most able (the top 20 pupils in each year group who excel across a range of disciplines).

The first study in the area of able, gifted and talented education is an exploratory piece investigating the connections that one teacher suspected between a psychological analysis tool and an area of pedagogical weakness in teaching. The potential for improving one through the other was the topic of enquiry.

The second report was a review of gifted and talented provision conducted by Year 12 students. Having reviewed provision for pupils in 2006 they wanted to investigate how pupils in particular viewed the changes and the current programme.

## 1.1 | Exploring the use of transactional analysis to develop able pupils' collaborative working

**Emma Lupton** (Stamford Queen Eleanor School)

### 1.1.1 Introduction and context

Stamford Queen Eleanor School is a secondary school in Stamford, Lincolnshire with close links to the neighbouring village of Wittering. The school has a programme of accelerated learning to provide students with the option to take their GCSEs in Year 9 with an enriched curriculum of additional qualifications available to them in Year 11.

Improving the provision for able students is a key element of both school and departmental improvement plans, and the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively remains at the heart of learning. This research project represents a particular area of interest for me as an Advanced Skills Teacher of English and a keen student and teacher of transactional analysis.


Transactional analysis is a model from psychology and therapy that offers a positive way of helping people to understand themselves and others. It presents an approach to understanding:

- how people communicate
- how people grow up
- how people see the world.

Three key principles underpin the approaches in transactional analysis:

- People are essentially 'OK'; individuals are of intrinsic value and have a right to exist.
- People can think and so can take in information, consider options and make decisions.
- Anyone can change – everyone has the capacity to grow and learn.





I began to develop my interest in transactional analysis over two years ago, working with Giles Barrow and Steve Russell, before undertaking the TA 101 course at the Berne Institute<sup>1</sup> where I completed the foundation year programme. Prior to commencing this research project I had designed and delivered a 'TA through Texts' course and led research in collaboration with local schools on this topic. This piece of work focuses on exploring the connection between transactional analysis in developing able students' communicative, collaborative and group work. I first became aware of a potential connection between transactional analysis and collaborative work in schools through my role as the school's professional tutor. This role involved conducting observations in different departments and led me to recognise that group work tended to be avoided – and when used was not always set up to encourage students to develop their ideas fully or take into account the opinions of others. The most common method for encouraging better group work is assigning roles to group members; this had become increasingly fashionable.

With my background in transactional analysis I was interested to explore whether teachers could develop students' understanding about how they themselves communicate and why (not in roles given out by the teacher). The expectation or assumption implicit within this study is that understanding transactional analysis will enable students to understand their own behaviours as well as the behaviours of others. This greater understanding will lead to an improvement in communication and collaboration, reduce conflict and enable greater pupil-to-pupil and/or pupil-to-teacher discussions that are personal.

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<sup>1</sup> The TA 101 course is the official introduction to transactional analysis.

### 1.1.2 Research aims

This research sought to explore whether an understanding of transactional analysis could have an impact on how able students collaborate. The aims of the research were:

- to consider how effectively able students were working collaboratively to advance their learning
- to explore what (if any) impact transactional analysis had on pupils' ability to reflect on their collaboration with others (pupils and teachers)
- to assess if any change in behaviour would be likely to lead to an improvement in learning
- to appraise whether understanding transactional analysis is an effective tool to improve the quality of collaboration in the classroom.

### 1.1.3 Method

This study focused on one class, a top set Year 9 English group, as it was thought these students would have the maturity to deal with the more complex ideas behind transactional analysis. The class were known in the school as a challenging group, and were an interesting research group because promoting a change in dynamic between participants (teacher and student and/or student to student) was a key hypothesis of applying transactional analysis techniques to teaching.

The study used a pre- and post-intervention design. The intervention was the teaching of a short course for the Year 9 class on transactional analysis. The 'TA through Texts' course was reworked to make it shorter and more accessible, and to focus on speaking and listening activities together with assessments. Four key areas of transactional analysis were focused on:

- windows on the world – there are four positions in the 'window':<sup>2</sup>
  - I'm OK/You're OK
  - I'm OK/You're not OK
  - I'm not OK/You're OK
  - I'm not OK/You're not OK

<sup>2</sup> Being aware of the position that we have adopted in relation to someone else can change our perception and lead us to make better choices in relation to our behaviour.

- ego states – transactional analysis defines and makes use of three basic ego states (parent, adult and child) which are seen as being present in all people and during all interactions
- transactions – the way in which people communicate with each other from their ego states
- strokes – units of attention or stimulus.

During the research, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected.

- At the beginning and end of the research period the students completed a 'learning storyboard' (this consisted of a ranking exercise of their perceptions of the importance of speaking and listening in relation to reading and writing).
- At the beginning and end pupils also completed a questionnaire inviting them to reflect on what they felt they needed to do to improve their performance in the key areas assessed in English.
- The pupils' present grades for speaking AF2<sup>3</sup> were established and discussed with the class, who were encouraged to focus on the assessment level that they felt they were at in this area.
- As key areas were explored, the students completed a reflective diary. This was sometimes for homework, where they shared a new concept with a family member.

Throughout the course, the students completed a number of speaking tasks, the primary focus being 'speaking and listening AF2'. This culminated in a group task to produce a video teaching at least one transactional analysis concept for an audience of teachers. Once completed, the storyboard, ranking exercise and questionnaires were all repeated and previous grades for AF2 were compared with those at the end of the transactional analysis course.

<sup>3</sup> The terms AF1 and AF2 (AF stands for assessment focus) relate to assessment criteria that were part of the National Strategies' Assessing Pupil Progress (APP) approaches in England.



#### 1.1.4 Key findings

The data suggested that teaching pupils about transactional analysis had a positive impact – they enjoyed learning about it, they thought of speaking and listening as more important at the end, and thought they were more reflective. However, it is important to note that the design of this study does not allow for causality to be attributed to the teaching of transactional analysis alone: just focusing on speaking and listening so intently may have had a positive impact regardless of the content of the sessions and learning about transactional analysis. However, the qualitative data does suggest that pupils associated changes in their awareness and behaviour (self-reported) as linked to the transactional analysis input:

- Overall, there was a positive response to learning about transactional analysis, with all students reflecting on the beneficial impact of transactional analysis on their relationships with others. This was particularly evident in the reflective diaries.
- Students reported that the importance of speaking and listening was high in the analysis of the first questionnaire, but the numbers reporting this as well as the rank given to it increased by the end of the intervention. This was particularly the case for three pupils – these pupils ranked it third in relation to reading and writing at the beginning of the study, but by the end of the sessions had ranked it first.
- Analysis of the second iteration of students' 'learning storyboards' and questionnaires revealed them to be more detailed and reflective after the sessions. In the questionnaires, in particular, students were much clearer about how to achieve higher speaking and listening grades. (However, this may have been the inevitable outcome of spending a term focusing only on this type of assessment.)
- The grades for speaking and listening AF2 increased for all students but there was a marked improvement for the more introverted students (categorised as introverted by the researcher based on anecdotal evidence). This may have been because the more confident students were now able to show more empathy and were encouraged to support others when developing their ideas. It could also be because students were allowed to work in friendship groups; from a transactional analysis perspective this may have enabled more of their collaborations to be in an 'adult' ego state space.

- Diaries, interviews and videos suggested a reduction in disputation talk during group activities (although this was not measured initially as a baseline, the class appeared to display greater ability for positive communication). This would need further testing in order to be verified.
- The videos of pupils teaching teachers about transactional analysis showed mastery over difficult subject matter. The more able members of the group were easily able to convey the most complex issues in clear and imaginative ways. However, the videos did reveal some misconceptions and over-simplifications of the psychology, suggesting not all pupils had fully understood the topic.
- A surprising (and unexpected) finding was the interest expressed by a number of parents at the Year 9 parents' evening about the material covered. Many had heard about the work through homework that was set which required the students to explain key topics to a family member.

#### 1.1.5 Conclusions and reflections

The study was inspired by the belief that transactional analysis could be a powerful tool for improving how students think about collaboration and how relationships work. The findings from this small-scale project suggest that transactional analysis shows promise for helping able pupils to improve their collaborative and group work. As well as highlighting a number of areas for further research work, this study has also encouraged greater reflection on ways in which better group, collaborative and discursive work could be encouraged and supported in the school. For example:

- sessions on transactional analysis or other complex topics could be delivered by able students, forming part of their speaking and listening assessment
- the school could continue to develop a speaking and listening policy
- the school could develop a bank of videos of group work to model the sort of collaboration that stretches able students
- the school could develop the way that peer assessment is approached using aspects of transactional analysis to support behaviour for rich collaboration.

In terms of the impact on my own practice, this work made me aware that I tend to engage less with more introverted students and I will continue to focus on how to encourage more confident collaboration in this area.

## 1.2 | Lessons from the evaluation of a gifted and talented programme

**Christopher Cox, Nick Lefley, James Baird-Parker, Andrew Hart, Daniel Walker, Olivia Schelpe and Charlotte Streng** (The Deepings School)

### 1.2.1 Introduction and context

This research project focuses on able, gifted and talented education which has been an important area for The Deepings School. Specifically, this report presents research conducted by a group of Year 12 students. They evaluated the programme of work for pupils registered as able, gifted and talented that has been in place within the school for the past five years.

The Deepings School is in rural Lincolnshire, in the centre of a triangle of three grammar schools based in the surrounding towns. The school is just six miles from the multi-cultural city of Peterborough in Cambridgeshire. Most of the students come from the local area with a significant number travelling by bus from Spalding, Bourne, Stamford and the Deepings villages.

The school is an 11–18 comprehensive school for students with a wide range of ability (some of whom passed the 11-plus examination but chose this school instead of a grammar school, and some of whom have significant additional needs). The Deepings School has a handful of students who successfully go on to Oxbridge and Russell Group universities each year; equally some leave in Year 11 seeking full-time employment or vocational courses at local FE colleges.

### 1.2.2 The development of a gifted and talented programme

In 2006, the school appointed a coordinator for gifted and talented students. The aim was to bring gifted and talented education to the whole spectrum of students in this category. Following this appointment the school made five key developments designed to support the school's community of able, gifted and talented pupils. These included:



- ***Development of a new school policy***

The coordinator wrote a gifted and talented policy and identified all the students in the school who met the government's requirements as being in the 'top ten per cent of students'. The process also identified students in the 'top two per cent'. Governors agreed the first gifted and talented policy in 2007 and it was reviewed and rewritten in 2010 (and accepted in 2011) prior to the school becoming an academy.

- ***The redefinition of what able, gifted and talented means***

Key Stage 2 National Curriculum Tests and Cognitive Ability Tests, amongst other resources, were used to identify gifted and talented students in the school. The register is updated annually for students from Years 7 to 13 and no removal of students from this register takes place. The school monitors students and if, at any point, there proves to be evidence of a drop in academic levels of attainment, students receive support to improve.

- ***Changes for staff and pupils***

The school introduced in-service training for staff regarding gifted and talented education and created a programme that presented gifted and talented students with challenges according to ability, allowing them to progress even further. In-service training was initially whole-staff based, and was later driven by subject and faculty which matched the student programme of development. Latterly this was integrated within the school's CPD programme for staff.

- ***Partnership with a local museum***

The gifted and talented programme was inspired by a successful summer school for gifted and talented students. During this students from Year 6 visited the Imperial War Museum at Duxford. At the time (2009) the museum was the only one offering a programme specifically aimed at gifted and talented students. Following the first visit, the school coordinated a series of future visits for gifted and talented students and the school and museum worked collaboratively to design a programme suitable for each student, each subject and each year group. By 2011 The Deepings School was making at least ten visits per year covering at least ten curriculum areas and six year groups.

- ***Oxbridge and Russell Group universities programme***

For students in Years 12 and 13, 2006/07 saw the start of an important Oxbridge programme which was to build on the success of each preceding year. Between 2006 and 2013 an average of two students each year have taken up a place at either Oxford or Cambridge University. This programme was further developed in 2011 to encompass students who might attend the Russell Group of universities. The latest cohort of Year 13 students saw 24 students applying for places at the latter.

- ***Local outreach work in feeder primaries: 'The gifted and talented Saturday schools'***

For some time, preparation for gifted and talented students joining the school had been a week-long summer school. This started in 2000 and ran each year until 2009. Driven by a need to reach more pupils in Years 4, 5 and 6, this was developed in 2010 into a series of gifted and talented Saturday schools. Its success was measured in the first year by an increase in the numbers of students attending the event across different subjects, primary schools and year groups (150) compared with the number attending the week-long summer school (25) in previous years.

### **1.2.3 Research aims**

The overall goal of this research project was to see if the school had been addressing the needs of its able, gifted and talented students. In particular:

- Had the school involved the students in their own learning process?
- Had the school allowed students to drive research programmes as part of their own educational development?
- Did the school allow students to work autonomously to enrich their learning experience?



#### **1.2.4 Method**

The research was led by a group of Year 12 gifted and talented students. The team met and was taught about research methods used to collect evidence. In order to investigate the aims of the project, the team decided to use a questionnaire and conduct interviews with groups of pupils. They created and designed the questions with support from the gifted and talented coordinator. The instruments were administered to 75 students, across four year groups.

The questions asked pupils to reflect upon different elements of the gifted and talented programme they had participated in; for example what activities they had taken part in; in relation to which subject areas; how they thought the activity had helped them progress; and what they thought the advantages and disadvantages of the experience were.

### 1.2.5 Key findings

Analysis of the results showed that:

- most students had enjoyed the experiences and in fact would like to have more opportunities to participate in the programme in future, with access to a variety of other resource centres
- all students preferred the opportunity to participate in activities outside school; the students enjoyed working across the school boundaries with their peers in other high-achieving groups as well as with students in different year groups
- students wanted more access to other areas of excellence
- activities allowed the students to gain more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the topic areas studied
- students in the research team developed their team-building skills and had successfully used the experience of this project to work autonomously
- the Saturday school (and the original summer school) prepared students for their arrival at the school
- the activities for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 students helped them to reach their educational targets successfully; the sixth form students who led the research relished the opportunity to expand their skills even further.

There were a number of interesting results that detailed analysis of the questionnaire responses showed:

- as learners' age increased so did their participation level
- the most popular activity (mathematics) was in Year 8; the least (history) Year 10
- about a quarter of students interviewed had chosen to take part in all the activities.

### **1.2.6 Reflections and recommendations**

The research concluded that the programme at The Deepings School had been positively received by students identified as able, gifted and talented. Based upon the findings explained above, the school decided to continue to develop the programme and enrich the opportunities for future able, gifted and talented students. This will take different forms, including:

- appointing an assistant headteacher to drive its development and appointing a 'leading teacher' to work more closely with students on the register
- involvement of more students in their own learning process by giving them responsibility to lead educational provision
- opportunity for students to work more closely with staff and other students in this area of education, to maximise its success
- re-launching the able, gifted and talented programme and giving it the title of the 'Rising Stars' programme.



Photograph courtesy of Rob Barton, Ely College.

## Theme 2 | Homework

Teachers at Ely College, Oxford Spires Academy and Danum Academy focused their research on the area of homework.

The report from teachers at Ely College, an academy for pupils aged 11–18, focused on a cross-curricular homework project. What the teachers found concerned the potential for homework to address cross-curricular themes and provide opportunity to exercise skills such as time management. However, their work also highlighted the difficulties that students, parents and teachers may experience or perceive: issues like perceived unfairness linked to parental help, and consistency in the way homework is set across the school. The outcomes pointed to ways that homework could be improved.

Teachers at Oxford Spires Academy, for pupils aged 11–19, conducted an exploratory investigation into their current homework practices. Their investigation shed light on what was working well. It also highlighted a group for whom homework was not working as successfully – presenting an opportunity for further investigation.

Danum Academy, for pupils aged 11–18, conducted a whole-school review of homework and implemented actions which led to changes in the behaviour of teachers and pupils in relation to homework. The changes made homework more consistent; a system of clear consequences was instigated. The result was more teachers setting homework in line with the school policy and more pupils completing and handing in their homework.



## 2.1 | Cross-curricular homework: how does it impact on attainment, engagement and teaching?

James Waters, Sarah Kupski and Sam Craven (Ely College)

### 2.1.1 Introduction and context

The role and value of homework continues to be hotly debated in the academic literature, as well as being a source of controversy among teachers, students, parents and senior leadership teams. Research has examined the effect of homework on pupil attainment, the perspectives of different stakeholders (teachers, students, parents and school leaders), the importance of both quality and quantity of homework, and the value of independent versus rote memorisation homework tasks (for example Hallam, 2004).

Despite the interest and debate around homework, there is a lack of high quality and practical research studies in the field. Opinions on the value of homework are often based on the personal anecdotal evidence of stakeholders and the maxim that we have always done homework, therefore it must be useful. Existing research evidence from studies which explore homework is mixed in terms of the benefit for pupils, and some studies highlight the possible negative effects of homework (Cowan & Hallam, 1999). Many homework studies can be highly contextual in terms of the age group, geographical location or subject area that they focus upon. This can limit their usefulness and application for practitioners who teach other age groups or subjects (for example, the issues raised by a US study on Grade 5<sup>4</sup> maths students do not lead to immediately applicable strategies for, for instance, Year 7 geography students in the UK).

To explore the value of homework, this project was inspired by the need to understand homework in our own context, particularly working towards a greater understanding of how pupils, parents and teachers view homework. This study attempted to connect research and school policy by involving our students in an investigation about cross-curricular homework.



<sup>4</sup> The equivalent of Year 6 in the UK

### **2.1.2 Aims and method**

The research focused specifically on a Year 7 homework project which cut across three school subjects (geography, history and personal and social development, or PSD). The aim of this project was to assess whether this cross-curricular homework project could raise attainment and improve other skills, such as time management and independent learning.

A qualitative methodology was used to collect data for this project. Student engagement was measured in three ways:

- the percentage of students who handed in their homework
- students' attendance at homework club
- through a student survey (this was a ten-question electronic survey that included open and closed (multiple-choice) questions); a total of 143 Year 7 students from the 2012/13 cohort returned completed questionnaires.

Parental engagement was evaluated via collection and analysis of letters, emails and conversations with parents about the project. Teachers' views were gathered via interviews.

### **Sample**

A total of 194 Year 7 students from the 2012/13 cohort were included in this study to maximise the range and significance of the results. The data from the 2011/12 Year 7 cohort (a total of 207 students) was also used as a baseline and in order to offer some degree of comparison in attainment. The project lasted for one half-term (September – middle of October 2012).

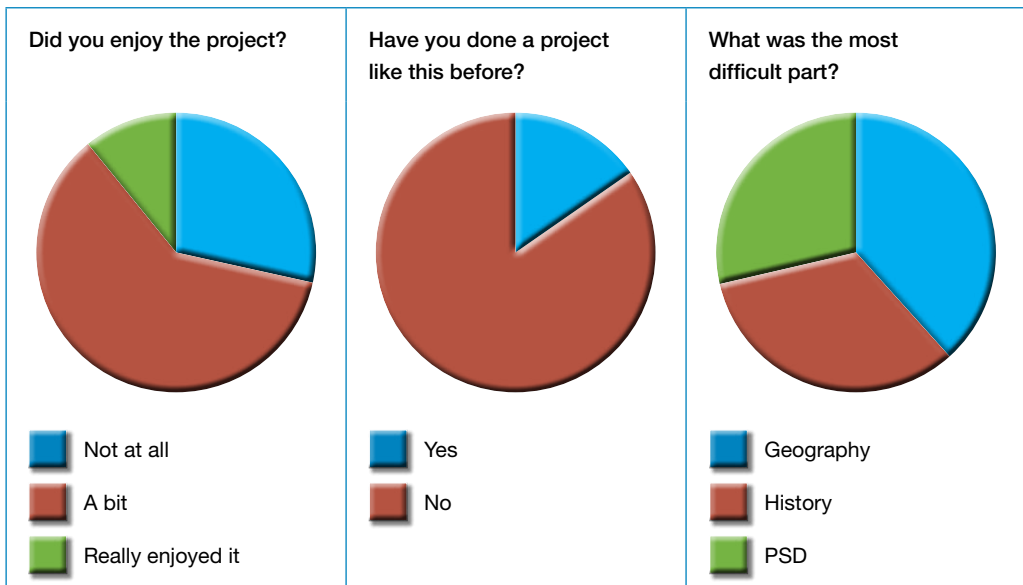
### 2.1.3 Key findings

#### Student engagement

Student engagement was measured through the number of students who submitted their homework. In total, 152 out of 193 students handed their project in – 79 per cent (and virtually all of these students submitted on time).

Some of the responses from the 143 students who completed the survey are shown below, in Figure 1.

Figure1: Student questionnaire responses (n=143)



The questionnaire showed that one of the main complaints from Year 7 students was that other students did not hand in their project on time. This feedback about other students, rather than about their own experience, was a recurring theme, which also emerged from parental feedback.

The majority (85 per cent) reported working on their project over a period of time (from a couple of weeks to every night), suggesting that the homework was providing an opportunity for pupils to develop time management skills. Most students reported getting 'a little' help on writing the project, which suggests some parental involvement.

In general, the students reported that the project was a good idea, but that the questions needed refining and simplifying. They found the project harder (76 per cent) and more time consuming (80 per cent) than their homework from other subjects, but also less enjoyable (56 per cent).

#### **Parental feedback**

Parental feedback, which was collected half way through the project, was negative with regard to the lack of detailed instructions for parents, heavy workload for the students and confusion over the project.

Parental feedback mirrored student feedback in terms of the worry that other students were getting too much parental help or were not handing their work in on time. It is interesting to note that many parents were as concerned about other students' work as they were about the work of their own children.

The concept of 'fairness' came up quite often in parent emails and letters, i.e. the idea that their child's work would not be graded fairly against the work of other students who had received more parental assistance. This was the most commonly mentioned source of stress, followed by the heavy workload.

#### **Teacher feedback**

Teacher feedback given through interviews showed that they perceived the project as a good idea but had some problems in implementation. Teacher workload was a major issue, as the project required a lot of marking. Standardisation of the marking was problematic because only one of the teachers was directly involved in designing the project. Many teachers felt that the Year 7 students did not have the required skills to do some elements of the project and it was recommended that future projects not start until the second term.

#### 2.1.4 Discussion

Our research shows that parental involvement is an important consideration in any new school programme about homework, a finding echoed elsewhere (Sharp et al., 2001). Parents are important stakeholders in students' learning and should be treated as such. The issues that parents raised in their comments about the programme might be explained to some extent by Ginsburg and colleagues, who examined the phenomenon of parental emotions affecting homework (Ginsburg et al., 2008). Taking the time to plan for parental involvement and educating parents about the goals, both longer-term and immediate, of the project could turn this factor into a positive element of homework projects (Jeynes, 2010).

Choice, time management and other aspects of independent learning are seen as important elements of 'good homework'. Some researchers contend that the student's own feelings of independence are linked to motivation and enthusiasm for a given homework project (for example Patall et al., 2010). Teacher feedback clearly indicates the need to develop these skills in the classroom as well as through homework.

The student feedback was very focused on the idea of fairness (or the lack of fairness) in terms of parents' support and dedication to the task. One of the most criticised aspects of the project was the perception that other students were not handing their work in on time. Some studies have shown that while high achievers can maintain their focus and enthusiasm when there are little or no perceived consequences for non-completion, or late work, this can affect the commitment of lower achievers (Bempechat et al., 2011). It is not clear if the students complaining about the missed deadlines of other students were high or low achievers, but it is something that could be investigated in the future.

### 2.1.5 Conclusion and recommendations

The homework project was an interesting trial. The qualitative data collected from pupils, parents and teachers highlighted the following concerns:

- Pupils found the homework project hard and time-consuming; teachers suggested that some may not have had the right skills to complete the tasks set.
- Parents appeared to be involved in helping students complete the assignment and found the experience stressful because of lack of information and a perceived concern that not all pupils would be marked fairly and there would be varying amounts of parental support provided, which could skew the marking process.
- Teachers thought the homework project offered the potential for greater time management skills development for pupils, and also reported that it created greater workloads in terms of marking, and difficulty in assuring consistency in marking across the subject areas.

Based on these findings the team made the following recommendations:

- All school stakeholders should be considered when undertaking new projects and/or policies at a school.
- Homework projects in the future should consider how to best accommodate and guide parental engagement.

### 2.1.6 References

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## 2.2 | Homework: strategies that work for us and our students

Patricia Thornhill, Rebekah Finch and Joanne Dunphy (Oxford Spires Academy)

### 2.2.1 Introduction and context

Oxford Spires Academy opened in January 2011, following the closure of Oxford School. Since opening we have enjoyed much success. The proportion of students achieving five grades A\*-C at GCSE, including English and maths, has risen from 31 per cent in September 2010 (at the predecessor school) to 57 per cent in 2012. Students' attendance at school has improved from 89 per cent in 2010 to 95 per cent in 2013. Lesson observation records confirm that 37 per cent of teachers have been judged to be outstanding and 94 per cent are good or better. These indicators suggest strong academic provision and student 'buy-in'.

Despite this success, there is a difference between our legacy and non-legacy cohorts in terms of work ethic (our current Year 10 and Year 11 cohort are our legacy year groups). These students have embraced the changes but there are pockets of students whose work ethic and levels of independence need to be further improved. The picture is better (but still in need of further development) in Years 7, 8 and 9, where students display greater levels of organisation and take increasing pride in the quality of their work. We believe that three levels of progress from Key Stage 2 to 4 should be the minimum and we aspire for over 50 per cent of our students to make four, if not five levels of progress, which is above what is expected nationally.

### 2.2.2 Research aims

We believe that homework is a key to academic progress and success and this research sought to investigate homework strategies at the academy. The intention was to:

- explore a variety of homework strategies and their effectiveness
- identify barriers to homework completion and identify where these exist
- assess the nature of homework set by teachers at the academy.

### 2.2.3 Method

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, in order to identify what was taking place in terms of the implementation of homework strategies and their relative success, and also to understand why some strategies were more or less successful than others. The research adopted the following methods:

- student voice interviews with a cross-section of students
- semi-structured interviews with middle leaders (including every head of department)
- a research diary kept by the researchers, documenting different homework strategies explored and evaluated.

### 2.2.4 Key findings

All the staff who were interviewed believed in the value of homework and acknowledged that there should continue to be a focus on this at leadership, teacher and student level. All middle leaders held the opinion that the quality of homework within their subject was of a good standard. All wanted improvements in the students' consistency of practice, especially in completion rates. There were some examples of excellent practice, notably in modern foreign languages and in some humanities lessons. Staff thought that through the 'accelerated reader programme' students in Year 7 developed a passion for reading both in school and at home.

In the majority of subjects, heads of department wanted to keep the profile of homework high on their agenda and continued to reflect and improve their practice. They believed in the importance of:

- promoting a love of learning
- encouraging creativity
- developing a passion for the subject
- reinforcing subject-specific skills
- promoting independence and independent learning
- stretching, extending and building on skills.

They thought their current strengths lay in:

- fostering independent learning
- consolidating skills to provide students with the opportunity to apply their learning or skills to a different topic
- preparing for controlled assessments.

Students reported they completed homework when:

- it was written on the board at the beginning of the lesson, and kept there until the due date, which served as constant reminder
- tasks were given out halfway through class work
- the homework task had been carefully prepared to act as a development, support or extension of the class work, and that its relevance was clear – where a homework task was complementary to a ‘main’ activity in a lesson this helped to ensure the highest quality of homework and its relevance to assessment objectives.

Other successful strategies included:

- ***Feedback***

Timely feedback of homework was a key motivator for students. Teachers reported this was achieved successfully through peer-assessment of homework, for example when the first 15 minutes of the lesson were set aside for marking and evaluation of homework. The idea behind the assessment of homework in the lesson was not only to encourage students to see the homework as an integral part of the learning, but also to encourage its completion.

- ***Preparation for public speaking tasks***

Teachers reported that the highest level of homework completion was seen in tasks that required preparation for speaking and listening exercises. For example, students could be told in advance they would be assessed on their ability to speak formally in front of their peers. Students who were perfectly content to arrive to the lesson without homework were suddenly panic-stricken at the thought of not having prepared for a formal speech. This may highlight that pupils think they can ‘hide’ not having done homework, whereas requiring them to speak publicly puts them in the spotlight.

- ***Pupils setting homework***

Student-setting of homework was also a motivator. At various stages, students were asked to set a homework task for themselves taking into account any feedback in books, verbal feedback given in lessons and/or what the students felt they needed to develop/work on. This personalised homework was reported by students as the most successful strategy, but teachers said that implementing it was very time-consuming with certain classes. Weaker students needed help understanding how to usefully implement written feedback and set work for themselves which was substantial and meaningful. In addition, the process was dependent on the transparency of feedback in student books, and how easily they could make links between assessment and learning. In a more able class, students were generally willing and able to set themselves challenging and longer tasks based on their own needs. However, the process of getting students to personalise their homework is an ongoing one; encouraging students to see the benefits is a long-term objective.

- ***Setting homework that was 'prep' or research***

Homework as 'prep' was successful in increasing completion rates. In this strategy, students were asked to prepare independently a section of a lesson (usually the starter). The task was usually research based – for example, a Year 11 class were told to find out what 'Grice's Maxims' were in readiness for a lesson on the spoken language. The next lesson began with an analysis of a transcript based on the maxims; without having done the homework, doing the task would not have been possible. At first, a number of students were obviously embarrassed and stuck and had clearly not done their 'prep'. Teachers reported that in subsequent lessons equipping them with the skills they needed to complete the homework helped them to make progress and enabled them to prioritise and plan the work.

### 2.2.5 Conclusions and recommendations

Encouraging students to see homework as an integral and complementary part of school work has been the intention of much of the work undertaken at Oxford Spires. A focus on investigating homework practices has encouraged more assessment, better homework tasks and more student talk about homework. However, there are still challenges. Getting pupils who are reluctant to complete homework is an ongoing concern and a complex task. There may be reasons for this that are not at present visible; for example, it could be related to a lack of support from parents, or not having the required skills and experience to carry out the tasks independently.

What we learned from this investigation includes the following:

- Teachers need to be consistent in their approach when setting homework and following it up.
- Teachers need to be adaptable and employ a variety of strategies in the setting of and following up of homework.
- Homework should be personalised, meaningful and challenging.
- The school could undertake more exploratory studies focusing on groups of pupils who persistently do not complete homework tasks, to shed light on the reasons for this and suggest strategies to overcome the issues.

## 2.3 | The changing face of homework at Danum Academy

Angela Moore, Debbie Calver, Lyndsey Dyer, Rachel Elliott, Sarah Higgins, Steve Richardson and Laura Saunders (Danum Academy)

### 2.3.1 Introduction and context

Danum Academy is a secondary school for pupils aged 11–18 serving a challenging catchment area on the east side of Doncaster. The Ofsted-rated 'Good' school is set on two sites, with Years 7 to 9 based at the Leger Way site and Years 10 to 13 based at the Armthorpe Road site. Key Stage 3 year groups consist of around 280 pupils, increasing to 300 at Key Stage 4 and there is post-16 provision serving around 410 young people. There are currently 300 staff supporting the progress and achievement of Danum students, with 120 of these being teaching staff.

As with many schools, homework is an aspect of learning that Danum Academy wanted to address as it was felt by staff, parents and students that it had been managed inconsistently. All schools are complex environments but a split-site school provides a range of other challenges that can often hinder smooth systems for the handing in and monitoring of homework. Following the success of behaviour and uniform policies introduced in 2011, when the school converted to an academy, the leadership team thought a whole-school monitoring strategy for homework was also needed. Running alongside the introduction of a monitoring strategy, an opportunity to discuss the role and purpose of homework more broadly presented itself. The Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) and 'Leaders in Learning' set about identifying and reviewing attitudes towards homework with our learners. This work started in the summer term of 2012 (before the introduction of the whole-school strategy) and was done again in autumn 2012 (after the introduction of the strategy).



The whole-school strategy, led and monitored by the assistant heads for Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 and teaching and learning, was launched in September 2012 as follows:

- Staff record the failure to complete homework on the whole-school data system using a drop-down menu.
- This triggers a text message home to parents informing them that a homework assignment has not been completed.
- An automatic half-hour detention is also generated by the pastoral administration system.
- Teaching staff supervise the detentions on a half-termly rota.

### **2.3.2 Research aims**

Homework has been a regular part of school life for as long as young people have been embarking on a formal compulsory education and many share the view that 'homework has pedagogical value' (Cooper, 1989).

The intention of this research project was to identify and review attitudes towards homework with a group of students from Key Stages 3 and 4 between June and November 2012, alongside the development of the academy's high-profile strategy to promote the uptake and completion of homework by all.

If homework has value then it has an important role to play in helping each student make the required progress, in a secondary context, from the end of Year 6 to the end of Year 11. If students do not recognise this value, the role of homework in supporting progress is potentially lost. Therefore the research aimed to explore the following questions:

- What are the attitudes and perceptions of our Key Stage 3 and 4 students towards homework, pre- and post- the whole-school strategy?
- Did the culture, attitudes and perceptions towards homework change between June and November 2012?
- What is the future of homework at Danum Academy?



### 2.3.3 Method

In order to address the aims of the project a mixed-methods approach was employed, including both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

- ***Student, staff and parent questionnaires***

The questionnaires were administered by the Leaders in Learning to students at Key Stages 3 and 4 and a small number of staff and parents. These comprised a range of multiple-choice questions. Questions covered the frequency of homework, the length of time spent on doing homework, the reasons for homework, what happens if homework is not completed and the use of the homework planner. These questionnaires were completed on two occasions, before and after the implementation of the new whole-school strategy.

- ***Student voice interviews***

Two group interviews were led by an AST or Leader in Learning with six students from Key Stages 3 and 4. Key stage interviews were conducted separately so that students were not intimidated by older peers. Questions covered topics such as their experiences of homework at Danum Academy, their understanding of the rationale behind homework and their views on what homework should or could look like in the future. These interviews took place on two occasions pre- and post- the new whole-school strategy. The interviews that took place in November 2012 also incorporated questions that allowed students to comment on how homework had changed and their views on these changes.

- ***Analysis of secondary data***

The quantitative data collected and analysed by the Assistant Head for Teaching and Learning was also made available to the staff involved in leading the research. These reviews focused on the available weekly data following the implementation of the whole-school monitoring strategy.

### 2.3.4 Key findings

#### Findings from the questionnaire and interviews that took place before the whole-school strategy implementation

The intention of the whole-school strategy was to monitor and raise the profile of homework; it had been developed to ensure that homework was being set by staff (either weekly or fortnightly) and to ensure that students at Danum Academy recognised that homework had to be completed by all. When reviewing the data from the student questionnaires completed in June 2012 the inconsistencies across the academy were confirmed. All students questioned stated that they did not receive homework every day. When this was addressed in more detail during the student voice interviews, both groups specified that they did get homework every week but definitely not every day, with some talking about homework as a 'rare' occurrence.

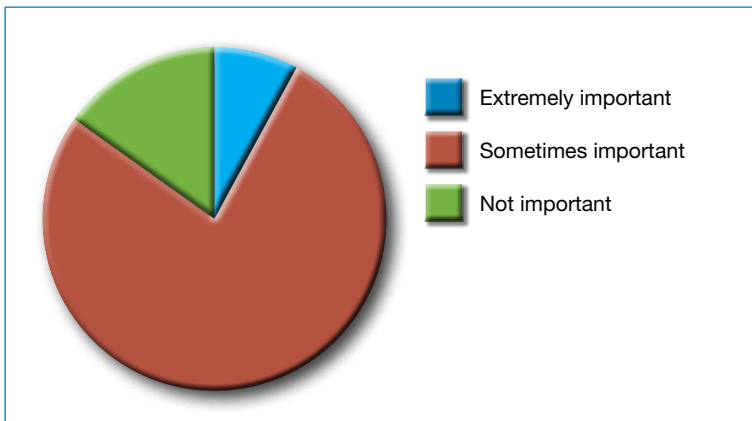
When homework was set the majority (around three quarters) said they spent 30 minutes or less on the tasks. During the student voice interviews, students said the time they spent on their homework did vary, depending on the task set. However, they tended to spend as little time as possible on practice questions and worksheets as they were considered 'boring' and 'repetitive' and did not seem to have much value; a view confirmed by Sharp and colleagues:

*'Pupils' preferences indicate that pupils dislike being set routine homework tasks which do not contribute to their learning. They prefer interesting, challenging and varied tasks that are clearly defined and have adequate deadlines'* (Sharp et al., 2001).

As with most schools, Danum Academy provides students with a planner to record their homework. Interestingly, only around a quarter of the students recorded their homework in their planner. Furthermore, at Key Stage 4 this reduced dramatically, with less than a tenth recording homework in this way. During the student voice interviews, all students admitted to rarely using their planner, with a number saying they had lost it. At Key Stage 3, students stated that they did not find the layout of the planner very useful because it was too small. Both key stage groups also said that they did not discuss their homework with their parents and their parents did not check their planner with them. These comments may reflect the findings of research by Pearson et al.: 'some parents lack the necessary knowledge and confidence to help their children' (Pearson et al., 2008) but the reasons for parents' lack of involvement were not made clear in our data.

When asked about the importance of homework in helping them to make progress, the majority of students thought that it was 'sometimes important'. Few described it as 'extremely important'. The figure below shows the breakdown of response in more detail:

**Figure 2: Perceptions of homework – June 2012**



During the student voice interviews, participants revealed that they understood why there was a need for homework, using statements such as: 'to encourage independence', 'to show your understanding of classwork', or 'to test your abilities', but they felt that the tasks they were given did not necessarily match up with these principles. They perceived homework as disconnected from the classroom as it was completed on sheets that 'do not lead to anything' as 'we don't go through it afterwards'. This is of particular concern, as stated by Black and Wiliam:

*'Homework exercises can be an invaluable guide to learning, but the exercises must be clear and relevant to learning aims. The feedback on them should give each pupil guidance on how to improve'* (Black & Wiliam 1998).

Overall, the results from the June 2012 research reiterated the concerns of the leadership team: the profile, uptake and perception of homework needed addressing.

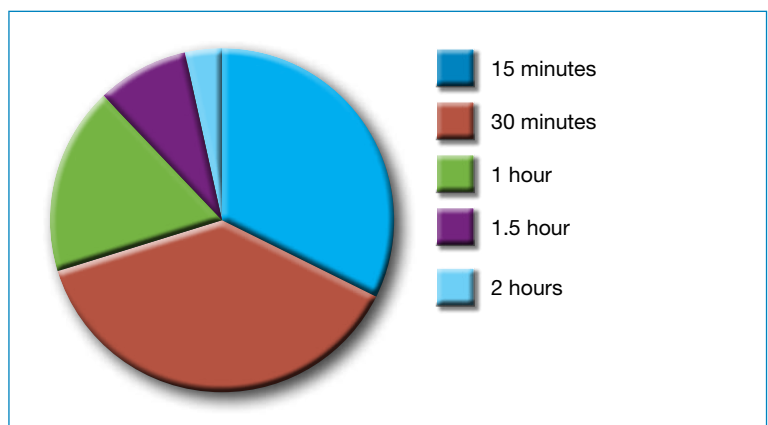
### **Findings from research following the whole-school strategy implementation**

Following the implementation of the whole-school strategy in September 2012, students were questioned again with a focus on whether the culture of homework at Danum Academy had changed.

The majority of the students questioned stated that they did not get homework every day, but there was an improvement (in the first questionnaire all students reported this). It is also worth noting that the new homework policy stated homework should be set either weekly or fortnightly so the requirement for teachers to set daily had been changed. All students questioned in November 2012 (questionnaires and student voice interviews) stated that there had been an increase in the amount of homework set across all subjects since September 2012. To further evidence the change in culture, over four-fifths of the students questioned were able to accurately describe the new whole-school policy for failure to complete homework. This demonstrated success in giving out a consistent message. During the student voice interviews, students were keen to discuss the clear 'repercussions [...] if homework is not completed', and reported that this motivated them to complete their homework. Despite being pleased overall with the new homework strategy, students stated that the setting of homework needed some further coordination as tasks from different subjects were often set on the same day with the same deadline, meaning that on some days four or five homework tasks were set.

When asked about the amount of time spent on homework tasks a much wider spread was evident in November. The figure below shows the responses given in November 2012:

**Figure 3: Amount of time spent on homework tasks – November 2012**



Although the '30-minute or less' time-frame still dominated, around one third of students were now spending between one and two hours on their homework; this figure was up from around one tenth in June 2012. It is also worth noting that students at Key Stage 4 were more likely to spend an hour or more on their homework.

With regard to the student planner, the use and view of which was disappointing in June 2012, in November over a third of students were recording their homework in their planner compared with just over a quarter previously. Although it cannot be proven, perhaps the combination of more regular homework, use of reminder protocols and automatic sanctions encouraged greater engagement in homework activity.

Despite this, pupils' perceptions about the importance of homework remained unchanged at the end of the study. The majority of students still perceived that homework 'sometimes' helped them to make progress, with marginal movements in the other two options ('extremely important' and 'not important'). So while they may have been taking note of their homework tasks in the required way and spending more time doing the tasks at home they still did not appear to place the same value on it as the school would have liked.

### **2.3.5 Conclusions and recommendations**

The research project initially set out to see if the consistent setting and monitoring of homework could improve the culture of homework at Danum Academy in a relatively short space of time. There is some evidence in the data that suggests improvements have been made and teacher and pupil behaviour has begun to change.

The focus on this topic as a research project also presented the opportunity to open up a dialogue between students and staff about their attitudes to and perceptions of homework. The next step is to consider what purposeful homework looks like and how innovative strategies can be used to move more students' perceptions of homework from being 'sometimes important' to being 'extremely important' in helping them to make progress. As Black and William stated:

*'The choice of tasks for class and homework is important. Tasks have to be justified in terms of the learning aims that they serve, and they can only work well if opportunities for pupils to communicate their evolving understanding are built into planning'* (Black and William 1998).

Similar schools seeking to address similar problems may wish to consider:

- employing a whole-school monitoring system that allows 'chasing' by individual teachers to be reduced and the message to students to be a consistent one (just like a behaviour or uniform policy)
- making the system simple, with a few steps that are easy to record/report for classroom teachers (this is also helpful for students and parents)
- creating a timetable for the setting of homework and completion deadlines to avoid overloading both students and teaching staff
- how homework can support progress more effectively (this is what we plan to do next, using the feedback from our students, parents and staff).

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## Theme 3 | White working-class pupils

Two schools chose to focus their investigation on the performance of white working-class pupils, which was a cause for concern in both schools.

Staff at St Mark's Church of England Academy, a school for pupils aged 11–18, focused their investigations on exploring the value of 'real world' contexts for learning, both inside and outside the classroom, and involved pupils in planning and delivering lessons. They discovered much about how white British culture was represented within the school as well as gleaning some successful strategies for engaging white working-class pupils more in learning.

Mount Street Academy is an infant school in Lincoln. Staff explored the relationship between different teaching styles on white working-class pupils' engagement, behaviour and attitude to learning. They concluded that a whole-school approach continues to be successful. Their research supported an ongoing commitment to, as well as development of, use of data, peer-to-peer support, personalisation and family support.

## 3.1 | Engaging white working-class pupils at St Mark's Church of England Academy

Joanne Isiramen, Gifty Ghansah, Thomas Slatter and Daniel Stevenson  
(St Mark's Church of England Academy)

### 3.1.1 Introduction and context

St Mark's is a smaller than average academy that provides a comprehensive education to secondary-aged pupils in the London borough of Merton. The vast majority of students are from minority ethnic heritages, with the largest groups being from Black Caribbean, African and white British backgrounds; white British pupils make up roughly 20 per cent of the school cohort. Roughly a third of the student body speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students known to be eligible for the pupil premium is high and the ratio of students supported by School Action and School Action Plus is well above the national average, with some experiencing specific and moderate learning difficulties and behavioural difficulties.

White working-class pupils are a concern for the academy. English and maths GCSE predictions for different ethnic groups show that 67 per cent of white British pupils are expected to meet their target, against 86 per cent and 90 per cent of Black Caribbean and Black African pupils respectively.

The table below shows the percentage of pupils in different groups expected to reach their target in English and maths. There are a few groups within the school that appear not to achieve as expected – one of these groups is the white British group. The predictions for this particular group show that they are expected to achieve less well than the comparative national group, although some progress had been made from 2011 to 2012.



**Table 1: the percentage of pupils predicted to reach their target in English and Maths at St Mark's Academy**

	English			Maths		
	Pupils reaching their target at the academy (2011)	Expected percentage of pupils reaching their target at the academy (2012)	National average of pupils reaching their target (2011)	Pupils reaching their target at the academy (2011)	Expected percentage of pupils reaching their target at the academy (2012)	National average of pupils reaching their target (2011)
All	78%	76%	71%	69%	74%	64%
High attainers	88%	60%	87%	88%	68%	85%
Middle attainers	74%	83%	70%	71%	78%	64%
Low attainers	76%	77%	47%	53%	68%	26%
FSM	78%	67%	55%	63%	63%	45%
LAC	0%	0%	37%	0%	0%	29%
Gifted		80%			92%	
White British	64%	67%	70%	48%	57%	63%
Black Caribbean	70%	86%	70%	56%	59%	62%
Black African	89%	90%	80%	79%	90%	77%
Female	77%	76%	76%	68%	77%	66%
Male	79%	77%	66%	70%	71%	62%
EAL	94%	81%	77%	86%	85%	75%
SEN A	77%	64%	56%	58%	33%	43%
SEN P	33%	79%	43%	17%	75%	31%
SEN S	0%	67%	26%	0%	67%	20%

Above Cohort
  Below Cohort

In addition to having lower predicted scores, Table 2 (following) also shows that white British pupils actually performed below the national averages in both English and Maths in 2011 and 2012, despite a slight improvement in 2012. In response to these figures as well as the perception that this group are disengaged from learning, this was chosen as the topic of the research project.

**Table 2: Percentage difference between school and national progress (pupils reaching their target level)**

	English			Maths		
	2011	2012		2011	2012	
All	7%	5%		5%	10%	
High attainers	1%	-27%		3%	-17%	
Middle attainers	4%	13%		7%	14%	
Low attainers	29%	30%		27%	42%	
FSM	23%	12%		18%	18%	
LAC	-37%	-37%		-29%	-29%	
Gifted				0%	92%	
White British	-6%	-3%		-15%	-6%	
Black Caribbean	0%	16%		-6%	-3%	
Black African	9%	10%		2%	13%	
Female	1%	0%		2%	11%	
Male	13%	11%		8%	9%	
EAL	17%	4%		11%	10%	
SEN A	21%	8%		15%	-10%	
SEN P	-10%	36%		-14%	44%	
SEN S	-26%	41%		-20%	47%	

Positive figures represent the academy outperforming the national average, negative figures reflect the opposite.

### 3.1.2 Research aims

The research team's discussions and personal observations laid the foundations of the project. Through these discussions and observations the team became aware that the white working-class pupils at St Mark's were not well understood or specifically catered for. As a result, the first aim was to investigate the experiences and attitudes of white working-class pupils at the academy towards learning.

This investigation revealed some of the things this group of pupils liked and disliked but also suggested that they would prefer their learning to be more relevant to their own lives. The secondary aim of the study, therefore, was to determine whether creating 'real world' contexts and relevant cultural experiences in the classroom would result in the improved motivation of disengaged and disaffected white working-class pupils.

In summary, the central aim of the research was to explore the experiences and attitudes toward learning of white working-class pupils at the academy; then, based upon the findings of this initial investigation, to investigate the value of a different approach to teaching and learning which considered the real world context more; specifically the following questions were considered:

- Can the creation of 'real world' contexts for learning, inside and outside of the classroom, be used to engage and challenge white working-class pupils' attitudes to learning and achievement? If so, how?
- Can the creation of 'real world' contexts for learning inside and outside of the classroom be used to ensure that white working-class pupils find their learning experiences more enjoyable?

The 'real world' context and cultural experiences elements involved:

- developing lessons or schemes of work that consider how pupils' learning is relevant to contemporary living and how a 'skills for life' based approach to learning can engage and challenge white working-class pupils
- developing opportunities for white working-class pupils to consider the relevance of their learning for success in the wider world (i.e. outside of school).

### 3.1.3 Method

The research into the engagement and achievement of white working-class pupils was conducted by teachers from different subject areas: Gifty Ghansah (maths), Joanne Isiramen (modern foreign languages), Thomas Slatter (music) and Daniel Stevenson (English). The initial premise was that all involved had a position of responsibility within the academy, either as second in charge of a department or with responsibility for coordinating areas such as achievement or community and events. It was expected that these individuals could take an active role in improving standards in their subject areas and across the academy as a whole.

In order to address the aims of the project, a mixed-methods approach was used. To address the first aim, data was collected through:

- a questionnaire focusing on pupils' family backgrounds and perceptions of school
- a focus group of white working-class pupils – a mixed gender sample was chosen from the 2012/13 Year 10 cohort based on their parental income and eligibility for free school meals. The focus groups considered perceptions of school, what makes a good lesson and pupils' own identity as white working-class and British.

To design and evaluate learning based on 'real world' contexts relevant to pupils' lives, the following activities were undertaken:

- joint planning session in which pupils worked with teachers to prepare what they would consider engaging lessons that include 'real world' contexts
- delivery of 'pupil-planned' lessons based on joint planning workshops
- lesson evaluations by students.

### 3.1.4 Key findings

#### What white working-class pupils liked about learning

Despite participants belonging to the same ethnic/social group, a wide range of views was displayed in the focus group interviews. In general when asked, pupils said their favourite lessons were those that involved the least writing – PE and art in particular. There was a general dislike for writing, for ‘copying stuff off the board’ and for lessons that were not ‘interactive’. Pupils also expressed their frustration with lessons that appeared not to connect to the real world. ICT was unpopular, perhaps because, as one pupil said, ‘everything is blocked’ on the internet – a situation very different from how computers are experienced outside of school. Pupils also expressed their frustration with humanities lessons, for example geography, because they felt disconnected from foreign countries. Several pupils who felt it did not connect to their own culture or religious views also disliked religious studies.

According to the pupils, parental attitudes towards school were positive, with the majority of pupils reporting that their parents valued education. Several were frustrated by having to stay in education post-16, in particular one pupil who was impatient for school to end so that he would be allowed to go and work for his father’s plastering business. Attitudes regarding the future were mixed. Many had positive aspirations and clear educational and career aims: ‘college matters’, as one pupil said. However there was a clear negative impression of job prospects in the local area, with several pupils speaking disparagingly of Mitcham. The only jobs in Mitcham, according to some students, were service industry jobs that they clearly did not think highly of.

#### ‘Real life context’ and relevant education

While projects addressing various ethnic minorities are not uncommon in the academy – for example, ‘Black History Month’ is an established event on the school calendar – the introduction of topics or sessions focused on white British culture were the first of their kind. Pupils initially expressed reluctance and fear that a ‘White Club’ (as it was jokingly referred to by one student) might be racist. In focus groups pupils did not show a strong ‘white’ identity, though several expressed the wish to have an equivalent to Black History Month for British culture. There was a clear positive attitude towards multiculturalism with pupils firm on the need to have good relationships with people from all backgrounds. A minority of students associated ‘Britishness’ with ‘poshness’, Mitcham being described as multicultural – ‘not like up London’. When asked, pupils said they did not see their culture reflected in the school.



To create 'real life context' lessons that were culturally relevant to this group, pupils took part in a workshop in which they planned lessons in maths, French and English with their teachers; and were given a small budget for each of the lessons they planned. They then took part in delivering the maths, French and English lessons that they had planned.

Following the completion of each of the three lessons, students were asked to conduct an evaluation, which took the form of a questionnaire and interview. As such the pupils used their experience of the lessons to make recommendations for how St Mark's could better foster an appreciation of white British culture within the school.

### **Reflections on the pupils' comments after the lessons were delivered**

Perhaps one of the most striking outcomes of this reflective project was the pupils' belief that the curricula insufficiently explored and celebrated white British culture and achievement. Pupils thought that a deeper, cross-departmental exploration could have many advantages and could assist St Mark's with challenging and deconstructing the negative view that pupils had of the area in which they lived. For example, pupils made comments about the local area such as: 'Mitcham is poor' and 'Mitcham is full of gangs'. One student even stated that he was moving out of the area for these reasons. Students thought they were poorly informed about the history of Mitcham and how to celebrate the achievements of 'white British faces' from the area or in London as a wider community.

Pupils preferred to plan activities that were active, 'fun' and involved 'less writing' but were, especially in the cases of maths and French, relevant to 'real life' experiences, for example monetary conversions in maths and using cookery to develop French language and grammar. When probed further about their dislike of writing, pupils explained they recognised the importance of developing their ability to write but found that they had to write for 'irrelevant' purposes.

Pupils of all abilities struggled with the autonomy of planning their own lessons – working outside of a predefined lesson structure planned by a teacher was hard and unfamiliar. Pupils are often given instructions and follow predetermined timetables and, while these aspects of school life have value, they can inhibit pupils' abilities to solve problems, think creatively and recognise the importance of learning in unfamiliar contexts. The pupils' reflections on this reaffirm the notion that the school could consider the unintended consequences of some pedagogical approaches used in classrooms.

### 3.1.5 Conclusions and recommendations

Our research has suggested that white working-class students can be engaged in lessons if they are enjoyable, engaging and relate to real life experiences. The results also show that white working-class students feel that their culture is not celebrated in the academy; that other cultures are celebrated through activities such as 'Black History Month' but that there is no equivalent celebration that they can relate to in the school. Moreover, the white working-class students were unaware of their own culture as this has never been talked about or celebrated in or outside school.

As a result of the investigation and the opportunity to reflect on the way we approach teaching and learning for white working-class pupils, we will consider other ways to engage them more in their own learning in a culturally relevant way. For example:

- identifying role models from the local community, or implementing a mentoring programme for white British working-class underachievers (such as the one in place for Black Caribbean boys at St Mark's), in order to make pupils feel more integrated into school life and help to improve their motivation
- involving parents more in attempts to raise the aspirations of their children (many of the pupils stated in the focus group that there are limited opportunities for parents to be involved in the academic welfare of their children); it would therefore be worth considering how a programme could be tailored to enable parents of white working-class students to be more involved
- while statutory programmes of study are in force, it is worth considering how writing for real purposes can be incorporated into schemes for learning.

## 3.2 | Raising the attainment and achievement of white working-class pupils

Becky Malam (Mount Street Academy)

### 3.2.1 Introduction and context

With an Ofsted rating of 'outstanding', Mount Street Academy is a nurturing school, firmly rooted in strong moral values. Its community takes pride in helping every individual to flourish. The exciting, creative curriculum and hard-working staff engage all learners in reaching the highest standards and aim to equip the pupils with a love of learning that we hope will last them for life. High aspirations and expectations are at the heart of school life and support the pupils' development of confidence, self-esteem and respect. The most recent Ofsted inspection was in October 2010 and described the school as:

*'A highly effective school that provides an outstanding quality of education and care for its pupils. School leaders have an exceptional commitment to the development of creativity as a tool to support the best possible learning and, as a result, the school has an especially successful and vibrant curriculum. This fully promotes enjoyment in learning and benefits not only pupils' academic progress but also their finely-honed personal skills. Pupils thoroughly enjoy school. All the curricular activities are linked, purposeful, interesting and enjoyable.'*

Almost all pupils have white British backgrounds. Very few speak English as an additional language. The number of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is broadly average. Their difficulties are mainly in speech, language and communication or they have behavioural, emotional and social needs.

Raising the attainment of white working-class pupils in the school remains an important priority and it is this group of pupils that was the focus of this research endeavour.



### 3.2.2 Research aims

The research aimed to assess how staff at Mount Street Academy could raise the attainment and achievement of white working-class pupils. For the purposes of this research and for reasons of practicality 'working-class pupils' were defined as those pupils receiving free school meals (13 per cent of the 2011/12 cohort). The research had two overarching aims:

- to investigate whether different teaching styles have an impact on the achievement and attainment of white working-class pupils; specifically, the research focused on whole-school and teacher-level language, strategies and pedagogies which:
  - increased engagement
  - ensured that behaviour was good
  - ensured that attitudes to learning were good
- to find out how the best teachers and support workers engage and motivate white working-class pupils to learn and achieve.

### 3.2.3 Method

In order to address the aims of the project, a mixture of methods and approaches was used. The project used a combination of primary and secondary data and qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, specifically:

- lesson observations
- interviews with teachers
- interviews with pupils
- data analysis and pupil tracking
- learning walks.

- ***Lesson observations and interviews with teachers***

All teachers at Mount Street Academy have lesson observations as part of their annual performance management. Teaching staff also self-appraise through videoed sessions on a termly basis. The results of this are captured on school self-evaluation forms. The researchers had access, with the permission of all teachers, to this observation data. The mix of teachers was such that there was a good range of experienced, newly qualified and trainee teachers.

- ***Interviews with pupils, parents and teachers***

Students were interviewed as part of the academy's '360 degree feedback' initiative,<sup>5</sup> during which parents, staff and pupils were all interviewed. Because of the ages of the pupils involved the questions were designed to allow respondents to answer through closed questions or offer short responses.

- ***Data analysis and pupil tracking***

Rigorous, termly analysis of pupils' progress and attainment is timetabled into the academic year. This analysis of data has been used in the research as a measure of attainment.

- ***Learning walks***

Staff have responsibility through distributed leadership for various aspects of the school development plan. As part of this responsibility, they conducted learning walks to establish how improvements, changes and new and embedded strategies were being implemented. For example, the assistant headteacher and head of school conducted regular learning walks which focused on learning, curriculum and attainment, and the special educational needs coordinator conducted regular learning walks which focused on behaviour or pupils who have individual education plans.

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<sup>5</sup> A process whereby all stakeholders are involved in reviewing the school's progress

The teaching styles that were implemented to address pupil achievement and motivation (referred to in the 'Research aims' section above) included:

- ***Precision teaching***

The basic structure of the precision teaching sessions was as follows: together staff and pupil looked at the word, letter, number or operation the pupil was working on. To learn a word the teacher read the word to the pupil; the pupil and the teacher then read the word together; then the pupil read the word alone. The pupil then had to track through a grid and read the word as many times as he or she could within a time limit. The sessions lasted no more than five minutes and should have happened daily. The adult tracked the pupil's progress through counting how many points were obtained (how many times the pupil read the word). This progress was then mapped using graphs.

- ***ImPact***

Outstanding teaching in all year groups is supported and scaffolded by 'ImPact' ('Improving my Practice through action') teams. With a specific termly focus (such as questioning) these teams research and trial different ways of working. The professional dialogue at these meetings has been rich and rewarding and pedagogical thinking has deepened. Looking at Bloom's Taxonomy (applied to questioning), gaps in provision were identified and staff worked together to redefine the way they planned.

- ***Creative curriculum***

The creative approach to the curriculum is another factor that gives teaching staff the tools and remit to inspire pupils, particularly those who are perhaps not academically gifted.

- ***Supporting the whole family***

Great value is placed on supporting the whole family at Mount Street and a family support worker is employed. There is a belief that if the family is actively engaged and supported, and understands the importance of their child's education, this in turn will increase engagement, ensuring that behaviour and attitudes to learning are good. Services provided by the family support worker are well used by the families of white working-class pupils.

### 3.2.4 Key findings

At Mount Street Academy enormous value is placed on the importance of pinpointing exactly where each pupil is, developmentally and academically. Careful, moderated assessment, underpinned by scrutiny of data leads to, in the case of last year, better progress for white pupils. This compares with other pupils in two subject areas where they were shown to be outperforming.

**Table 3: Progress in the Key Stage for groups of pupils in 2012 (internal tracking data)**

	No. of pupils who were in Year 1 in Nov 2010	% pupils	Reading		Writing		Maths	
			Previous progress from Y1T2 to Y2T2	Progress from Y1T2 to Y2T6	Previous progress from Y1T2 to Y2T2	Progress from Y1T2 to Y2T6	Previous progress from Y1T2 to Y2T2	Progress from Y1T2 to Y2T6
All pupils	79	90%	● 6.0	● 10.2	● 5.8	● 10.1	● 6.3	● 10.6
Male (12 are SEN)	47	53%	● 5.9	● 9.7	● 5.6	● 9.7	● 6.2	● 10.4
Female (4 are SEN)	33	38%	● 6.2	● 10.6	● 6.1	● 10.3	● 6.5	● 10.1
FSM (ever 6) (5 are SEN)	11	13%	● 5.5	● 10.7	● 5.0	● 9.6	● 6.4	● 11.3
Not FSM	68	77%	● 6.0	● 10.1	● 5.9	● 10.2	● 6.3	● 0.3
Closing the gap in the rate of progress between FSM and Not FSM pupils			0.5	-0.6	0.9	0.5	-0.1	-1.0
ESOL	4	5%	● 5.0	● 10.0	● 6.0	● 10.5	● 6.5	● 10.5
Not ESOL	75	85%	● 6.1	● 10.2	● 5.8	● 10.1	● 6.3	● 10.4
Other EM	6	7%	● 5.2	● 10.0	● 5.2	● 10.0	● 6.4	● 11.0
White British	73	83%	● 6.1	● 10.2	● 5.9	● 10.1	● 6.3	● 10.4
School Action	3	3%	● 6.0	● 10.7	● 6.0	● 9.3	● 6.0	● 11.3
School Action Plus	12	14%	● 4.2	● 8.8	● 4.0	● 9.7	● 6.2	● 10.5
Statemented	0	0%						
All SEN not S (11 boys, 4 girls)	15	17%	● 4.3	● 9.2	● 4.2	● 9.6	● 6.2	● 10.7
Not SEN	64	73%	● 6.3	● 10.4	● 6.1	● 10.2	● 6.4	● 10.3
Closing the gap in the rate of progress between SEN and Not SEN pupils			2.0	1.2	2.0	0.6	0.2	-0.3

Outstanding progress	●
Good progress	●

Satisfactory progress	●
Unsatisfactory progress	●

Table 3 shows that 73 out of a total of 79 pupils in Year 1 in 2010 were white British and that they made outstanding progress in reading, writing and maths.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 4: Attainment at the end of Year 2 for groups of pupils in 2012 (internal tracking data)<sup>7</sup>**

			Reading		Writing		Maths	
	No. of pupils in June 2012	% pupils	Attainment end of KS1 in 2012	Attainment nationally in 2011	Attainment end of KS1 in 2012	Attainment nationally in 2011	Attainment end of KS1 in 2012	Attainment nationally in 2011
All pupils	88	100%	▲ 17.3	15.8	▲ 15.5	14.4	▲ 17.4	15.7
Male (12 are SEN)	50	57%	▲ 16.7	15.2	▬ 14.6	13.7	▲ 17.2	15.7
Female (4 are SEN)	38	43%	▲ 18.0	16.4	▲ 16.6	15.2	▲ 17.5	15.7
FSM (ever 6) (5 are SEN)	14	16%	▲ 18.7	13.9	▲ 16.1	12.6	▲ 18.3	14.1
Not FSM	74	84%	▲ 17.0	16.2	▲ 15.3	14.9	▲ 17.2	16.1
Closing the gap in the rate of progress between FSM and Not FSM pupils			1.7	-2.3	0.8	-2.3	1.1	-2.0
ESOL	4	5%	▲ 15.5	15.0	▲ 15.0	13.9	▲ 16.0	15.1
Not ESOL	84	95%	▲ 17.3	16.0	▲ 15.5	14.6	▲ 17.4	15.9
Other EM	6	7%	▲ 15.0		▬ 14.3		▲ 16.3	
White British	82	93%	▲ 17.4		▲ 15.5		▲ 17.4	
School Action	3	3%	▼ 12.3	12.3	▼ 11.7	11.2	▬ 14.3	13.0
School Action Plus	13	15%	▬ 14.1	11.2	▼ 12.7	10.0	▲ 15.8	12.0
Statemented	0	0%		7.4		6.4		7.7
All SEN not S (11 boys, 4 girls)	16	18%	▼ 13.8	11.9	▼ 12.5	10.8	▲ 15.5	12.6
Not SEN	72	82%	▲ 18.0	16.9	▲ 16.1	15.5	▲ 17.8	16.7
Closing the gap in the rate of progress between SEN and Not SEN pupils			-4.3	-5.0	-3.6	-4.7	-2.3	-4.1

<sup>6,7</sup> It should be noted that, in both Tables 3 and 4, the data presented groups white British ethnicity and does not disaggregate for FSM, the indicator used to indicate class in this study. This means that the results here are indicative only of the performance of the ethnic grouping and not of the target group precisely.



For example, scrutiny of the data in Year 2 during the project found that the rate of progress in writing and maths was higher than in the previous year, from a lower starting point. There was little difference between boys and girls in the rate of progress, although girls made less progress in reading and were lower attaining in reading (which is unusual). Rates of progress in all three classes were matched – all pupils had the same access and entitlement to quality first teaching. Attainment overall was lower than in previous years, significantly in reading.

When interviewed about what makes the most impact on white working-class pupils, the school's special educational needs coordinator and the staff were very clear about the importance of the assessment and data scrutiny. They believed that analysis of this data enabled them to employ strategies such as precision teaching, for currently ten per cent of the white working-class pupils.

Below are the findings in relation to each of the teaching styles that were implemented:

- ***Precision teaching***

Teachers reported that the progress and confidence of pupils had improved, the scores were increasing each week and this was translating into progress in terms of how many words pupils could read on sight.

- ***ImPact***

Observations revealed that questioning became more visible and apparent on lesson plans, and the thinking behind the higher-order questions was very clear. Members of staff described the process undertaken as 'inspiring' and one said: 'It has revolutionised the way I plan; I now look forward to planning.' This innovative approach has motivated teachers to create a shared and positive culture.

- ***Creative curriculum***

Roughly three-quarters of pupils replied to the questionnaire saying that they enjoyed learning and loved coming to school. Nearly nine out of ten parents said that their children were motivated by the sense of excitement that the curriculum demanded and that they enjoyed school.

- *Whole family support*

Parental responses showed that whole family support was being accessed and was valued by parents:

- a third of parents reported that they had attended family support meetings, workshops or resources
- a tenth of parents reported that they had attended the parent council
- just over half of parents reported that they had sought support about behaviour and/or emotional issues.

The school also insists on 100 per cent attendance at parents' evenings, to further highlight the importance of involvement and this is supported by providing a family meal free of charge, a crèche for siblings, and a choice of two evenings with late and early appointments. If parents are unable to attend, staff are relentless in their insistence and pursue them to find a mutually convenient time where a personal meeting or phone conversation can take place. In some cases teachers have had to arrange this meeting at weekends.

### **3.2.5 Conclusions and recommendations**

A whole-school approach to supporting all pupils' progress remains important at Mount Street Academy. This research has shown us that such an approach is also well received in relation to white working-class pupils. In summary, the research demonstrated that:

- teachers reported that white working-class pupils were responding well to the precision teaching
- observations of and interviews with teachers showed that teachers had responded well to ImPact, finding it inspiring and motivational
- the creative curriculum was enjoyed by pupils
- the 'whole family support' was valued and used by parents.

Collectively, the school considered that, as a result of these findings, the provision for white working-class pupils was enhanced through the whole-school approach. However, as a result of our research a number of additional commitments were made, including:

- effective assessment and analysis of data – this is crucial and should be at the heart of raising the attainment and achievement of any pupil or group of pupils
- exploring peer-to-peer support and collaborative learning – making best use of the skills of the staff team to deliver internal continuing professional development
- offering differentiated, bespoke teaching
- raising the achievement and attainment of white working-class pupils, working closely with the family to ensure that support is continuous.





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