Action research
at St Mark's Academy 2013

Edited by Alex Elwick and Anna Riggall

St marks

Welcome to CfBT Education Trust

CfBT Education Trust is a top 30* UK charity providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Established over 40 years ago, CfBT Education Trust has an annual turnover exceeding £100 million and employs more than 2,000 staff worldwide. We aspire to be the world's leading provider of education services, with a particular interest in school effectiveness.

Our work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development, and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. We provide services direct to learners in our schools, through projects for excluded pupils and in young offender institutions.

Internationally we have successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the European Commission, the Australian Agency for International Development, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in our educational research programme.

Visit **www.cfbt.com** for more information.

* CfBT is ranked 27 out of 3,000 charities in the UK based on income in Top 3,000 Charities 2010/11 published by Caritas Data

Welcome to St Mark's Academy

St Mark's Church of England Academy is an 11–18 academy situated in Mitcham, South London. It offers a commitment to high achievement within a community of care, underpinned by the Christian values of hope, love and trust. The academy encourages the development of the moral and spiritual well-being of students, alongside their academic success. The academy works closely with, and is supported by, its sponsor, CfBT Education Trust, and its key partner, the Southwark Diocesan Board of Education.

Our vision at St Mark's Academy is to raise the achievement and life chances of our students and to serve our community by providing access to a range of activities, first-class resources and opportunities. As a Church of England academy, we encourage development of our students' moral and spiritual well-being as much as their academic success.

We are inclusive of all faiths, as well as none, and support unity between different religions, cultures and beliefs. All our students are individuals and every student is valued for their uniqueness and the skills and aptitudes they bring to the academy. A key strength of St Mark's is the very high quality relationships that exist between members of a highly diverse school community – the academy has a strong set of values shared by all.

The academy is situated in extensive grounds in a pleasant green-field location with first-class resources. Our specialisms in Science and Performing Arts support our students to develop confidence, understanding and skills in these areas and beyond into the broader curriculum.

Contributors

Rachel Sewell, Joshua Coulson, Alexander Kilford, Hannah Fahey, Safijo Jimale, Ewa Czarnecka, Eva Kingcome.

Contents

Foreword

Tony McAleavy, Development and Research Director, CfBT Education Trust

Developing a real professional learning community within the staff of a school is an ambitious task but one which the teachers and leaders at St Mark's Academy have shown can be achieved with the right support and some hard work and dedication.

CfBT is an organisation committed to evidence-based practice. I am delighted, therefore, that teachers at St Mark's have been so enthusiastic when it comes to conducting research – testing out their hypotheses and fully committing to the application of research in classroom practice. CfBT is keen to foster such an approach across our wide family of academies and free schools, ensuring that our teachers and school leaders aspire to achieve the best possible learning outcomes for their students by evaluating and assessing their own practice and methods.

This is the third volume of findings from action research at St Mark's. The staff of the school have now built up a substantial body of work. I have no doubt that this impressive track record of applied research made a contribution to the positive view of the school expressed in the recent Ofsted report.

St Mark's Academy is leading the way in terms of developing an active research community and a research culture amongst the staff – this publication emerged from within the school itself and has been driven and inspired by the former principal (Chris Mallaband), his successor as substantive principal (Lisa Peterkin), and the interim principal (Rob Thomas), as well as the academy's governors and, of course, a large proportion of the academy staff who had the courage to experiment, to innovate and to evaluate their approach in order to improve their practice and deliver the best learning experiences and outcomes for their pupils.

Tony McAleavy,
Development and Research Director,
CfBT Education Trust

Tony McAleavy
Development and Research Director, CfBT Education Trust

Introduction

The learning and teaching journey at St Mark's Academy has come a very long way; it has been characterised by a shift to a more collaborative, reflective and creative culture. This has enabled and empowered staff to refocus on student learning and their role as facilitators of that learning. The best schools are outward-facing and recognise the importance of learning from others; the practitioner research programme has enabled us to gather and share research and has been a key strand of our journey to date. It has proved an excellent opportunity for teachers, teaching assistants and other academy staff to use research as a vehicle for improving their practice and as a tool for refection and self-evaluation.

This year's practitioner research programme has focused on the key area of improving the quality of teaching and learning. Within this area, staff have explored areas such as an investigation into whole-school literacy; motivating learners in religious education; the impact of local fieldwork investigation on student experiences; the perception of school values on achievement and behaviour; and an examination of the transition from Year 11 to Year 12. This research will be fundamental in improving teaching and learning at St Mark's and the recommendations will be shared and inform our next steps and vision for the future. This will in turn empower young people to take ownership and leadership of their own learning journey.

We are delighted to present the outcomes of the practitioner research programme at St Mark's Academy in 2012-2013. It has been a pleasure to work in collaboration with our staff and with CfBT Education Trust. Our thanks go to Dr Geraldine Hutchinson, Chair of Governors, Anna Riggall, CfBT Research Manager, and Alex Elwick, CfBT Research Officer, who have made this possible.

Lisa Peterkin
Academy Principal

Rob Thomas
Interim Principal

1

An investigation into whole-school literacy strategies and their effect on writing skills

Rachel Sewell

1.1 | Introduction

Throughout this academic year I have worked as the academy's literacy coordinator. The role of the secondary school literacy coordinator is typically to persuade all staff that teaching reading, writing, speaking and listening is the responsibility of everyone, no matter what their subject area is, and to provide training, resources and frameworks which enable all teachers to develop students' literacy skills.

The role is becoming increasingly common across British secondary schools largely because of Ofsted's and exam boards' current focus on the importance of cross-curricular literacy skills, particularly written accuracy.

Historically at St Mark's, whole-school literacy had been the responsibility of a member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) or the Head of English. However since these members of staff always have significantly high workloads they were often not able to devote enough time to literacy and as such we felt that the topic had not been enough of a priority.

As an academy, we were becoming increasingly aware that we needed to make developing our students' literacy skills a priority across the whole school. Our data revealed that writing was the area in which our students needed most support, and we were aware that this is often a barrier to achieving the results which they are capable of.

With this in mind, when I began my role in September 2012, I set about doing two key things to improve students' writing skills and demonstrate that literacy was firmly on our agenda: I introduced the 'weekly literacy focus' and also a 'literacy marking policy'. My research aimed to assess the impact of these different whole-school literacy strategies and whether they encouraged all departments to teach writing skills explicitly and effectively.

1.2 | The weekly literacy focus

The first of the two initiatives reported here is the weekly literacy focus. In order to encourage all staff to begin explicitly teaching writing skills, it was decided that as a school there would be a weekly focus on a different written accuracy skill. Across the year there were five different focuses: punctuation; homophones; sentence accuracy; spelling; and structuring writing.

Each week the school identified a specific focus, such as semi-colons or 'ei' spellings, and staff were provided with an assortment of resources which they could use to teach the focus. Staff were asked to make their students aware of the focus and explicitly teach it once per class per week. For example, if a Spanish teacher saw their classes three times a week they were asked to devote ten minutes to teaching the focus during one of these lessons. The resources provided were designed to be used during either a starter or plenary session and often asked students to use the literacy focus to produce a sentence or paragraph about the topic of the lesson. The aim was to use this technique to encourage students and teachers to view written accuracy as important in all subject areas. Where possible teachers were requested to ensure the literacy focus fitted naturally into the teaching but where this was not possible teachers were asked to make a separate space for it – typically at the start or end of the lesson. Teachers often found ways to ensure that the literacy focus fitted in to the lesson seamlessly (see below for details of such practice).

1.3 | Methods

The research conducted in this area involved undertaking a 'learning walk', a student voice survey and also a Head of Department (HOD) questionnaire. The learning walk took place in January 2013 and involved visiting one teacher's lesson from each department in the school (11 lessons in total) while they taught the 'don't vs. doesn't' focus. This particular literacy focus aimed to teach students how to conjugate the two verbs accurately and avoid writing colloquial expressions such as 'she don't know what to do.'

The HOD was asked to nominate one teacher who was willing to have their lesson observed and also to specify the class they would like to be seen with. This was done to enable all departments to showcase their best practice: staff were given the opportunity to show off the skills they were developing rather than feel as if they were being inspected.

During the visits to each class the observers noted how the teacher had incorporated the focus into the lesson, if they had explicitly taught the rules behind the skill, and the extent to which students demonstrated a developed understanding of the literacy focus at the end of that section of the lesson.

The second research method was a survey of Year 7 and 8 students. The questionnaire asked students to comment on how effective they felt the literacy focus had been and how they thought it could be improved.

The third and final method was a questionnaire given to HODs, which asked them to evaluate the weekly literacy focus project, with a particular focus on successes and areas of development for their subject area(s).

1.4 │ Findings

Observations of teachers conducted during the learning walk showed that ten out of eleven taught the focus as part of their lesson. Seven of these teachers had incorporated teaching 'don't vs. doesn't' into the topic of the lesson. For example, in a science lesson, midway through the lesson the teacher presented students with a series of statements about endothermic energy and asked students to select the appropriate form of the verb 'don't'/'doesn't' using traffic-light cards. Whilst in a physical education (PE) lesson the teacher ended the lesson by asking students to use 'don't'/'doesn't' to sum up what they had learned about core skills in basketball. The other three members of staff used the resources provided as standalone starters or plenaries.

Six out of ten teachers explicitly taught the rule behind conjugating 'don't'/'doesn't' through using the verb table provided or through effective questioning. However, there was a tendency to devote most of the literacy focus section of the lesson to quizzing students on 'don't'/'doesn't' rather than explicitly teaching the rule. This meant that often a small proportion of students seemed to have gained a clear understanding of how to conjugate the verbs accurately.

An example of excellent practice was in a French lesson in which the resources were adapted to link teaching 'don't'/'doesn't' to conjugating the verb *avoir*; the conjugation of the verb altering according to the person was explained clearly. Students were really engaged and when the same class was observed in geography later in the day, the students had an impressive understanding of how to use the two forms of the verb.

This suggested that when teachers are constrained to teaching the literacy focus for only ten minutes as part of a lesson, it becomes doubly effective if the same class receive ten more minutes of teaching from another teacher in the same day or week.

However, this is still not happening consistently enough across the academy. The student voice survey revealed that students are conscious that while some teachers teach the focus regularly, others do not. When asked what could be done to improve the literacy focus next year, many students answered 'try to do it in every lesson' or 'tell the teachers to include them in all our lessons.' This was particularly evident from Year 10 and 11 students, as many felt they rarely learned the about the literacy focus outside of English lessons. This was also evident during the learning walk, as seven out of eleven teachers had opted to be seen with a Key Stage 3 class.

The HOD questionnaire revealed that teachers often do not teach the focus because lessons are already planned in advance and, particularly for Key Stage 4 students, the volume of material that needs to be covered on GCSE or BTEC courses means that teachers often feel they do not have the time to teach the focus. This is disappointing, since more and more exam boards are awarding marks according to written accuracy, and is perhaps something that needs to be further emphasised to teachers.

It also came to light that the focuses were often difficult to fit into specific lessons. For example a science teacher felt that teaching 'ei' spellings had been hard to incorporate into the topics he was teaching that week, whilst a teacher of French and Spanish commented that 'some of the focuses not being transferable to the teaching of French and Spanish at Key Stages 3 and 4' made his department reluctant to teach them.

1.5 | The literacy marking policy

The literacy marking policy is the second of the two initiatives reported on here. A new marking policy was required that would be functional in all subject areas for marking written work. A number of different options were researched and one was created which would be simple to use even for staff not familiar with teaching writing skills. The policy recommended the use of symbols to identify errors with capital letters, full stops, punctuation, spelling, paragraphs and clarity of expression.

The policy also enabled students to take an active role in developing and correcting their written accuracy, rather than simply providing teachers with a way to highlight mistakes. Therefore the marking policy was designed so that teachers should place the relevant symbol in the margin of the line in which a student had made an error. The idea was that this would enable the student to use the symbol to initially identify their mistake and then correct it themselves. The policy asked students to use the symbols to find their mistake, correct it and then circle it to show it had been corrected.

On an INSET day at the beginning of term, the policy was launched with staff, who were also trained on how to use it. The use of the policy for students of different abilities was discussed and it was decided that for lower-ability students only five mistakes should be identified to prevent them from feeling overwhelmed and demotivated when they received marked work. It was also suggested that, for these students, staff might decide only to mark for capital letter errors in one piece of writing, or only for full stops in a second.

The group also discussed using more complex symbols such as the 'EXP' symbol (which asked students to re-write a short section of their writing to improve clarity) with higher-level students and focusing on the spelling of complex words.

1.6 | Methods

The investigations in this area were conducted in two ways. Firstly, in January 2013, whilst conducting the learning walk, students' books were inspected in order to formatively investigate how consistently the literacy marking policy was being used.

This demonstrated that more work needed to be done on encouraging use of the marking policy. As a result continuing professional development (CPD) sessions for staff were scheduled and staff were made aware that a marking scrutiny exercise would be carried out later in the year. During the CPD sessions, strategies for encouraging students to respond to the marking policy were focused on and the importance of using it consistently across the whole school was emphasised.

The criteria for the scrutiny focused on three areas: whether the policy was being used to identify students' mistakes; whether there was evidence of differentiation in its use for students of different abilities; and how effectively students had responded to their errors.

The scrutiny was conducted during two days with a focus on Years 7 and 9. The scrutiny involved looking at three exam scripts from every teacher in the school's marking and at a range of different abilities for each teacher. Data was then collated into departments, and overall strengths and areas for development were identified.

1.7 | Findings

The initial read-through of student books to look at use of the policy in January
showed evidence of three out of 11 teachers beginning to use it, but it was not yet
being used consistently and students needed more training in how to respond to
and correct their errors.

The marking scrutiny at the end of the year demonstrated improvement on
this, with 11 out of 26 teachers using the policy to mark written work. However,
practice across the academy remained varied.

Typically, best practice was seen in departments where exams rely heavily on
extended writing. It was evident that these teachers had taken the policy on board
and were using it exactly as it had been intended: these teachers placed symbols
in the margins of students' work to identify errors and allowed students time in
lessons to identify and correct their own mistakes.

There was also evidence of teachers differentiating their use of the literacy marking
policy by using fewer and simpler symbols for the less able and a variety of more
challenging symbols for higher-ability students.

Some teachers had also asked students to reflect on their performance in their
exam by writing their own targets; this led to comments such as 'I need to work
on my capital letters', demonstrating that, when the policy was used well, students
were taking on board the importance of written accuracy in exams.

However, there were some departments that had not used the policy at all, or had
corrected errors entirely themselves and not allowed students the opportunity to
correct their own. Typically these were departments for whom marks in GCSE
exams for written accuracy were limited or non-existent.

This demonstrated that more work needs to be done as a school to encourage
all departments to take responsibility for emphasising the importance of written
accuracy to students and teachers through effective promotion of the use of the
literacy marking policy. Further, it needs to be used in a way which encourages the
students themselves to identify and correct the errors in their writing and reflect on
their mistakes.

1.8 | Conclusion

In terms of steps for next year, consistency needs to be a real focus. We have made a good start this year in embedding the teaching of written skills across the academy: regular teaching of the literacy focus and use of the literacy marking policy is beginning to happen consistently across some departments and there are examples of impressive practice from some individual teachers.

However, further work needs to take place which focuses on consistently embedding the two initiatives across the whole school; this research reveals that this is not yet happening consistently enough across all departments and year groups.

The key to embedding the initiatives consistently will be further staff training. Regular CPD sessions with modelled examples of how to incorporate the literacy focus into different subject areas and topics would help resolve staff's reluctance to teach the focuses regularly. Staff would also benefit from further training on how to explicitly teach the rules behind the focuses rather than simply quizzing students. It may also be of benefit to think more carefully about creating focuses which can be integrated into different subject areas more easily.

There is also a clear need to work more closely with HODs to ensure that they are all on board with the use of the literacy marking policy and are encouraging and monitoring regular marking of student work with the policy. Again, further training on its use and ways to encourage students to respond effectively to teacher corrections will help to develop its effectiveness across the school.

With an increase in staff training and buy-in from all departments, we would be able to further emphasise the message to students that writing skills are a vital life skill and it is the responsibility of all their teachers to help them to develop their written accuracy.

2

Can you teach the academy's Christian values through sport?

Joshua Coulson

2.1 | Introduction

In 2012, St Mark's Church of England Academy developed its three core Christian values (love, hope and trust) and nine 'character strengths' that all students and staff would be expected to demonstrate throughout the academy.

- **Love** – fairness, respect and self-control

- **Hope** – service, honesty and forgiveness

- **Trust** – kindness, openness and perseverance.

The academy has chosen values that can be broadly applied to people of other faiths, or no faith, even though they originate in Christian teaching. These values are at the core of everything that St Mark's Academy does. Held together by a relationship with God, these values link the teaching of Jesus to actions that we take and decisions that we make. These values form the academy's fundamental ethos, and should drive every decision that is made in the academy.

There have been different attempts to bring these values to life, including a 'Values in Action' campaign. Indeed, how these values are played out every day is a topic of interest within the school and is also in part the focus of this piece of research. This report will discuss firstly, whether sport has a role to play in helping to teach an understanding of what these values mean in action to certain students, and secondly, explore the most effective ways in which sport can do this. As a preliminary study, the report focuses on a small cohort of students, all Year 7 boys who attend the football club. This group have been chosen as they are likely to be attracted by the link to sport, and being new to the school this year had not had a previous introduction to the school values. This enables the impact of the investigation to be more easily evaluated as the students may be more aware of how the values are connected to changes in their outlook and behaviour.

In addition, this group were an interesting starting point for such an investigation because a real need to address behavioural issues had been identified by many teachers. The research aimed to find out whether addressing the academy's character strengths through sport can be linked with any extrinsic, positive impacts on behaviour for learning – in addition to any intrinsic benefits of developing character strengths in the students in question. The question therefore is can values-focused, sporting workshops teach and instil the academy's values to Year 7 boys, and can this have a positive impact on behaviour for learning?

2.2 | Methods

In the academic year 2012/13, there were three main ways in which the academy's Christian values were taught through sport:

- a whole day event, consisting of team-building games and activities for all of Year 7, organised by Christians in Sport

- a two-hour workshop for the 25 Year 7 boys who attended the Year 7 football club, including one hour of classroom-based teaching and discussion, followed by an opportunity to put what had been learned into action through participating in sports games, organised by the same group

- weekly football training sessions led by the teacher who coordinated the workshops.

In order to explore the impact of these three strategies, a range of methods was used:

1. **Student questionnaires**
   25 students attended the workshop and all 25 completed a questionnaire, which included open and closed questions focusing on enjoyment of the activities and the impact of the teaching about the values.

2. **Student group interviews and discussions**
   A group of four students who attended the workshops as well as the football club were invited to take part in a group discussion about the impact of teaching the school values to the students, particularly with regard to any longer-term behavioural changes.

3. **Observation of behaviour**
   Observations of the students during the different activities were conducted and some photographs were taken – the purpose of the observation and photos was to capture evidence of enjoyment and engagement.

4. **Feedback from staff**
   Feedback about specific students and their behaviour was collected informally from a small number of other members of teaching staff, as well as their views on the success of the various games and workshops.

2.3 | Key findings

In terms of the engagement and enthusiasm of participants in the team-building games, the observation of the two events suggested a high level of enthusiasm towards the activities from every participant (even those not previously disposed to a high level of engagement with sport). The games and workshops were well designed so that it was impossible to succeed without every member of the team participating, and more able sportsmen and women were encouraged to help their teammates rather than chastise them or become frustrated. The level of competition ensured students tried as hard they could, but this was kept under control. In a later focus group discussion, Year 7 students commented on how the character strengths became 'more real' as a result of the activities, with good behaviour praised and easily understood in the context of sports games. One student suggested that the values were made simpler through the illustration of values in sport, which are often more explicit and obvious than values in the classroom.

Students appeared to enjoy the workshops, and their responses suggested they saw the value of them and thought that their understanding of the academy's values and character strengths was improved as a result of their participation. The table below shows the response to the questionnaire completed by students who had participated. The responses support such a conclusion.

Figure 1: Student opinions on the Christians in Sport events
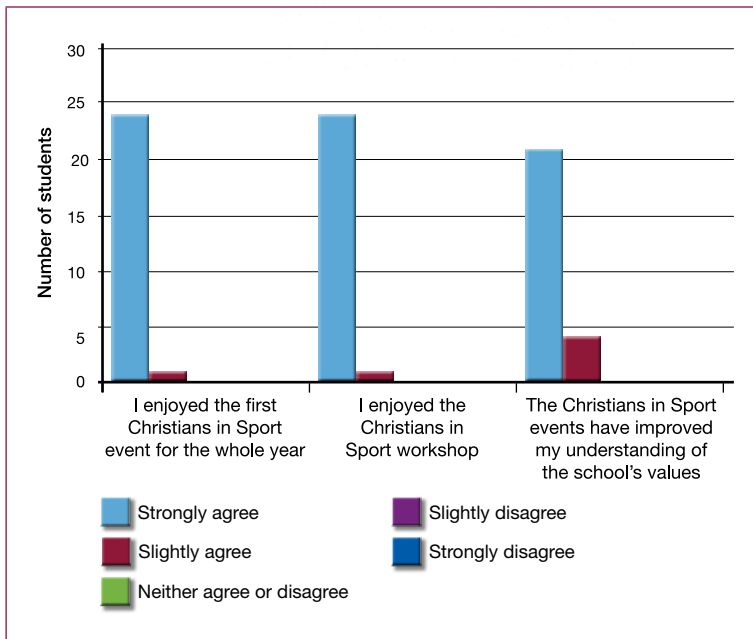
Following the second, more focused workshop, students were asked about the impact of the session, particularly with regard to the academy's character strengths. Many students picked up on the importance of honesty in sport. One student said:

'In sport you should be honest and you should be honest to God. In order to play a good game we had to tell the truth when we were out, and if we didn't it ruined the game for everyone else and for ourselves, and it was lying to God.'

Other students commented on the importance of not cheating. It was evident that this character strength, and the link to Christian values, had been successfully taught. Some students were able to take this further and discuss how this could impact on their behaviour, although in an interview a couple of months after the workshop students admitted that this workshop had been forgotten when it came to actually telling the truth to a teacher during lessons. This suggests that more follow-up work may be needed to remind students of the lesson they had learned.

Perseverance was also picked up as an important character strength that students felt was developed through the workshop:

> *'I think perseverance is encouraged through sport because it tells us that you should never give up and try until you can't walk.'*
>
> *'When we play football we have to keep trying and never give up, even if we're losing or if we're tired. And it's the same in school with lessons that we find difficult. We have to keep on going and never give up.'*
>
> *'God doesn't give up on us, and we shouldn't give up when life gets tough.'*

In the second statement, the student made a clear link to how the workshop could have further implications beyond the sports pitch. Again, students appreciated the importance of this Christian character strength and saw it in a new, more exciting light as a result of the workshop.

Other values that came through regularly in focus group discussions and questionnaires with the pupils were self-control, trust and fairness. The workshop gave an excellent illustration of how sport can only work when both teams play fairly and follow the rules, and the research demonstrates that the cohort understood this message:

> *'Without a referee who people listen to there is no way that the football match can go ahead.'*

Equally, students learned the value of self-control whilst playing football, and the positive impact this can have on themselves, their team and also the match in general and how one person losing control can spiral into a series of negative events. Finally, trust was promoted and understood through the illustration of teamwork and the need to rely on one another in order to succeed. Students appreciated the link to trusting a teacher and also their peers and the value of being a trustworthy individual. One student wrote:

'I am going to try to play fairly and tell the truth. Also, I will try not to argue with the decision makers even though you really want to, because I now know that it doesn't help anyone if I do that.'

In the weeks following the event and workshop, there was a noticeable improvement in behaviour of both boys and girls at the Year 7 football club, with virtually no poor behaviour if a team lost and players shaking hands at the end of every match for the first time. To provide a continuous link with the Christians in Sport activities, and in keeping with the academy's Christian ethos, a prayer was said at the beginning and end of each training session. Students responded well to this, and it indirectly reminded them of the lessons that had been taught during the workshops.

Staff commented on the excellent behaviour of students at the two Christians in Sport events, with no behavioural issues reported despite the busy nature of the day and the large number of students in close proximity to one another. This was evidence that the values being taught were being followed on the day itself, and the response from the staff members who were present was extremely positive.

However, in the longer term, student behaviour for learning during lessons had, on the whole, not improved as result of these sessions. In a later group discussion students commented on the need for a more regular reminder of the values that had been taught. Reference to 'good sport; bad sport', in relation to the values that were exemplified by sportsmen during the sessions had been used to good effect by one teacher, but these would need to be used more widely across the school to engender a longer-lasting impact.

2.4 | Conclusion

The research suggests that sport can be an effective way of teaching character strengths and the school values to students, particularly those who are enthused about sport. This is because such students appear to immediately engage with the content due to its link with something that interests them, bringing these sometimes abstract concepts to life. The sessions carried out with Christians in Sport, in conjunction with regular reminders of the academy's character values – both during the normal course of school life, and through the football club – have meant that students have a firm understanding of these values.

The challenge remains to encourage these students to take this one step further and apply these Christian values that they have learned through sport actively to their lives, beyond just the football pitch, and into the classroom; to go beyond mere understanding to action. This research suggests that this has not yet been achieved, with both teachers and the pupils themselves admitting that the values taught are too far removed from students' lives on a day-to-day basis. Progressing to this next step could be achieved with more regular, focused workshops that make a more direct link to how these Christian values which the students can see when they take part in sport, can be applied when they are frustrated in the classroom or struggling with friendships. In particular, there needs to be an increased emphasis on behaviour for learning, and how the values and strengths learned through the workshops can be transferred positively into the classroom. This may also develop as the members of the cohort in question mature and increase their understanding of how they can apply these Christian values in their daily lives. It may also be helpful for teachers to learn more about the approach taken and how this has helped students so they can refer to the particular way in which these were taught, to remind students and support their continued good behaviour.

Overall, despite the capacity for further improvement to see the character strengths truly developed by the students in question, it seems evident from the research that the academy's Christian values can be successfully taught through the use of sports workshops and activities, and this is something that could be developed further with other year groups and groups of students.

3

The impact of local fieldwork investigations on student experience in geography

Alexander Kilford

3.1 │ Introduction

Throughout the last academic year St Mark's Academy's humanities department has undergone a transformation, particularly within geography, where two new specialist members of staff were employed. Historically the subject of geography at St Mark's has been unstable, with a mixture of non-specialist teachers and cover staff taking lessons over the previous two years, which has resulted in a lack of enthusiasm for the subject, few field-work investigations and poor exam results. In order to build enthusiasm for geography within the school, the decision was made to organise outdoor investigations throughout Year 7 because it has been found that students have a more positive attitude towards environmental concepts and science when given the opportunity to carry out fieldwork (Bitgood, 1989). It has been found that field trips offer several benefits to learning as they can increase motivation about a particular topic as well as provide a greater intellectual insight into the subject; this gives further reason to encourage outdoor learning (Kern and Carpenter, 1984). One of the key reasons to focus on fieldwork at St Mark's was to ensure that pupils could gain essential field skills within Key Stage 3 that the 2011/12 cohort missed out on as a result of not having access to specialist teaching. It was decided that we should create fieldwork experiences local to the school, not only because of cost implications and accessibility, but also because fieldwork can influence improved attitudes towards the site visited, potentially improving student attitudes towards the local environment and the community (Knapp, 2000).

When introducing local fieldwork to St Mark's, the intention was to increase enthusiasm for geography throughout the school and to give a more practical and intellectual focus to the subject. This resulted in the planning and execution of two local fieldwork investigations which were embedded within the schemes of work to enthuse the students and build a deeper understanding of the local environment. The first fieldwork investigation involved students generating a hypothesis around what people might think about the local area and testing that hypothesis by putting questions to residents in Mitcham town centre. The second local fieldwork investigation did not leave the school grounds. This involved the students carrying out a quadrat study (isolating a small sample area), measuring and mapping the flora of the outdoor areas of the school and completing an environmental quality survey to decide where the best place to build a new school garden would be. Both of these fieldwork investigations were put together with the intention of providing the Year 7 students with the opportunity to begin to practise basic essential fieldwork skills.

3.2 | Research aims

This research aimed to evaluate how local fieldwork can contribute to geography learning outcomes and student perceptions of the subject, with a specific focus on the two fieldwork projects described earlier.

3.3 | Methods

In order to gather evidence for this project two different methods were used, which included a student questionnaire as well as two student focus groups.

Student questionnaire

Year 7 students were asked to complete a questionnaire which probed the development of their skills in geography, their perceptions of local fieldwork as well as their personal reflections on both fieldwork trips that were conducted throughout the year. A total of 77 students from across the year completed the questionnaire.

Student focus groups

Two mixed-ability groups of Year 7 students were chosen to be interviewed about the two specific local fieldwork investigations that were undertaken. During these focus groups the students were given questions to reflect upon their experiences. Students were asked: why they thought they had done the fieldwork; what they had learned; what skills they thought they had improved; how their views of the local area had changed; and whether they had enjoyed these experiences or in fact preferred to learn within the classroom.

3.4 | Key findings

As can be seen from the results of the student questionnaire shown in Figures 2 and 3, local fieldwork overall had a positive impact on student experience.

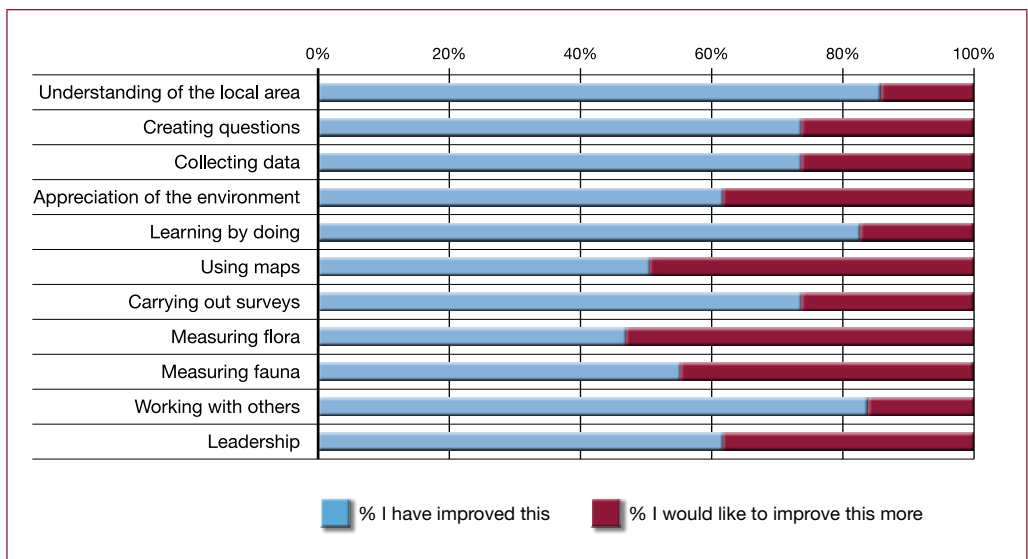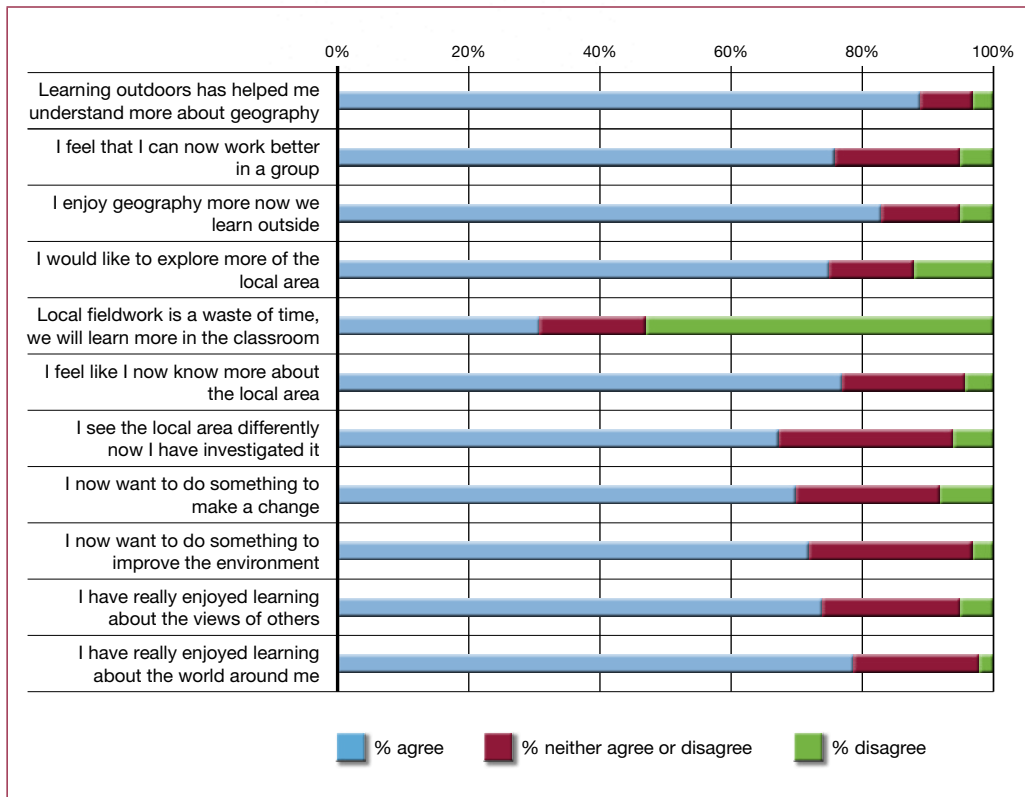**Figure 2: Pupils' perception of their own skills**

Figure 3: Pupils' responses to the survey questionnaire

Figure 3: Pupils' responses to the survey questionnaire

Categories (top to bottom):
- Learning outdoors has helped me understand more about geography
- I feel that I can now work better in a group
- I enjoy geography more now we learn outside
- I would like to explore more of the local area
- Local fieldwork is a waste of time, we will learn more in the classroom
- I feel like I now know more about the local area
- I see the local area differently now I have investigated it
- I now want to do something to make a change
- I now want to do something to improve the environment
- I have really enjoyed learning about the views of others
- I have really enjoyed learning about the world around me

Legend:
- % agree
- % neither agree or disagree
- % disagree

Focusing on Figure 2, the majority (86 per cent) of the students reported that they had a greater understanding of the local area compared to before undertaking fieldwork. They also reported that they had improved essential geographical field skills such as creating questions (74 per cent), collecting data (74 per cent) and carrying out surveys (74 per cent). Areas of improvement for local fieldwork were also identified; more could be done to help students improve their map skills, as only 51 per cent of students felt their work had improved. (Although this was not a focus of either of the trips, this could be addressed in future Year 7 fieldwork.)

Figure 3 describes student opinion about the fieldwork that was carried out and shows that the majority of students (89 per cent) agreed that 'learning outdoors has helped [them] understand more about geography', while 83 per cent of the students surveyed agreed that they 'enjoy geography because it takes the learning outside,' emphasising the huge impact that fieldwork investigations had on pupils at St Mark's and pupil attitudes towards the subject. A positive effect was shown in the impact that was reported, weeks and in some cases months after the start of the trip, as most students (70–72 per cent) thought that they would like to make a change to their community or improve the environment around them. This was supported by the focus groups' responses, where students explained what they would do now to change Mitcham – 'we need to have more bins to reduce the amount of littering and make it a cleaner place' – suggesting the students now had an opinion on their local area and understood how to improve it. Students reinforced this through expressing what they could do to develop their school environment: 'we should plant trees and have more recycling.'

Throughout the two focus group sessions undertaken with students, it was clear that the local fieldwork we completed this year was particularly valuable. The students discussed among themselves what the positives and negatives of learning outside of the classroom were. Throughout this discussion it was evident that the students enjoyed the field trips because they were able to take the lesson into a different environment and saw their local place from different people's points of view. Students also stated that the lessons were more fun because the work was easier to understand and that lessons engaged learning more. One of the students clearly summed up their thoughts on the local fieldwork:

'It's good to have freedom to explore learning in real life, instead of looking at pictures or the teacher talking about it. I think I learn more outdoors than I do in the classroom.'

These quotations, taken directly from the focus groups, have emphasised the positive aspects of running local fieldwork within geographical education at St Mark's. It is clear that student perceptions of the subject have improved and students appear to have developed a deeper and nuanced understanding of the topics studied.

3.5 │ Conclusion

This research suggests that at St Mark's, local fieldwork investigations can positively impact upon student experience; students feel they have improved their geographical knowledge, enhanced their fieldwork skills and improved their opinion of geography as a subject. The study has emphasised that it is important for students to see what they are learning about for themselves and by doing this, in the words of Hope, their 'enjoyment and understanding is enhanced' (Hope, 2009). Overall it is clear that giving our students a 'hands-on' and a cognitive approach to learning about the world is a key part of geographical education.

Literature suggests that fieldwork can allow students to 'develop a range of subject-specific skills' and in some cases 'encourage the development of interpersonal skills' for the future (Andrews et al., 2003; Shah, 2006; Boyle et al., 2003), which could represent the focus for a future research study into the area, building upon the results of this study.

Using the results from this research, the humanities department now aims to ensure that all students throughout Key Stage 3 have an opportunity to experience local fieldwork investigations. These investigations will be embedded within the curriculum for students to gain greater knowledge of our local environment and fieldwork skills in preparation for Key Stage 4, as well as increasing students' perceptions of geography throughout the school.

References

Andrews, J., Kneale, P., Sognez, W., Stewart, M. & Stott, T. (2003) 'Carrying out pedagogic research into the constructive alignment of fieldwork.' *Planet*, 5, 51–52.

Bitgood, S. (1989) 'School field trips: an overview.' *Visitor behaviour*, 4, 3–6.

Boyle, A., Conchie, S., Maguire, S., Martin, A., Milson, C., Nash, R., Rawlinson, S., Turner, A. & Wurthmann, S. (2003) 'Fieldwork is good? The student experience of field courses.' *Planet*, 5, 48–51.

Hope, M. (2009) 'The importance of direct experience: a philosophical defence of fieldwork in human geography.' *Journal of geography in higher education*, 33, 169–182.

Kern, E. & Carpenter, J. (1984) 'Enhancement of student values, interests, and attitudes in earth science through a field-oriented approach.' *Journal of geological education*, 32, 299–305.

Knapp, D. (2000) 'Memorable experiences of a science field trip.' *School science and mathematics*, 11, 65–71.

Shah, A. & Treby, E. (2006) 'Using a community based project to link teaching and research: the Bourne Stream Partnership.' *Journal of geography in higher education*, 1, 33–48.

4

Motivating learners in Year 9 religious education

Hannah Fahey

4.1 | Overview

This research sets out to develop a better understanding of the learning strategies that need to be to employed to ensure that students within Year 9 are motivated to learn in religious education (RE). To gain such understanding, the three department leaders and investigators of this study used three collaborative planning sessions and three joint observations, one in English, one in RE and one in drama, to plan and reflect upon the learning of eight pupils across these subjects.

The research sought to understand the benefits of collaborative planning and observation on understanding the needs of pupils in Year 9 RE. It also placed a strong emphasis on involving pupils in the monitoring and review of these lessons.

4.2 | Context

St Mark's Academy has embarked on, and is still on, an incredible journey in terms of teaching and learning. When the academy opened in 2006 after the closure of Mitcham Vale School, it was faced with the difficult challenge of removing the negative label that had been attached to the school.

In June 2009, following an Ofsted inspection, St Mark's was given 'Notice to improve.' Following this outcome, Ofsted returned in September 2010 and graded the academy as 'Satisfactory,' making it clear that teaching and learning needed to improve if the school was going to be viewed as 'Good'.

St Mark's Academy is now a 'Good' school. According to the most recent Ofsted report, it is not yet graded as 'Outstanding,' because 'a small proportion of teaching is not yet consistently good or better. This limits students' progress and affects their attitudes to learning' (Ofsted, 2012: 2). I believe this description is an accurate explanation of the current picture regarding teaching and learning within the school, and also clearly demonstrates that middle leaders need to improve pockets of teaching and learning, to improve the motivation, engagement and learning of pupils overall. It is with this in mind that this research was conducted.

It is my ambition to create a culture of learner-driven learning whereby pupils are involved in the planning, monitoring and review of lessons. Carol Dweck, a leading developmental psychologist, is a firm advocate of the importance of motivation and engagement amongst learners and the link between outstanding teaching and learning and pupil engagement (Dweck, 1999). I hope that this research will be another opportunity to model outstanding learning to my department and to further develop the journey of teaching and learning within St Mark's Academy.

4.3 | Methods

The aim was to examine which learning strategies are most effective when attempting to motivate and engage pupils in Year 9 RE. To do this, four pupils were selected in Year 9 who continually failed to display engagement and motivation within lessons. From here, a cycle of action research was engaged in, whereby lessons were planned with a range of learning activities, and a variety of qualitative data collection methods were used to reflect on the effectiveness of these, in relation to the original project aim. This enabled a triangulation of data, in order to draw accurate conclusions. This process – of collaborative planning, teaching, monitoring, reflection and adjusting practice – was carried out three times.

Sampling

Firstly, in relation to sampling, a process of theoretical sampling ('a non-random sample in which the researcher selects specific times, locations or events to observe in order to draw evaluations' (Neuman, 2006: 224)) was carried out. The research involved four pupils (boys and girls) in Year 9, over three lessons. This helped to ensure that the generalisations drawn from lessons were not limited to a single period or pupil, which increased the validity and reliability of findings. Pupils were asked to keep a blog in response to open questions surrounding their learning. Teachers had access to this blog. In order to ensure that the evidence gathered was as focused as possible, pupils were provided with four questions to structure their written reflections. These were:

1. From which parts did you learn the most?

2. Which parts did you enjoy the most?

3. Were there any parts that you did not enjoy?

4. Would you change anything?

Observations

To generate an unbiased understanding of which learning activities were most effective in encouraging motivation and engagement for pupils within Year 9 RE, two colleagues were asked to observe the three lessons being taught and comment on the extent to which pupils within the sample were engaged in each activity, how much they contributed and the nature of their talk or contributions. Teacher reflections were shared through a post-lesson oral debrief within 24 hours of the lesson. These reflections were then typed into a blog and were available for all to see.

Semi-structured interviews:

Finally, in order to gain a more in-depth insight into pupils' thoughts regarding which activities they felt they were learning the most from, three post-lesson, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the four pupils.

4.4 | Key findings

For the purpose of this research, and in order to preserve their anonymity, the four pupils within the sample will be referred to as Tom, Yaris, Lucy and Karl (these are not their real names).

This section is based around three themes which seemed to have a particular impact on motivation and engagement: role play; collaboration; and group dynamics. Each of these themes is discussed below, with quotations from both pupils and staff members used to exemplify them.

Role play

The first major theme that appeared to emerge from the analysis related to the use of role play, and its ability to enhance learning by encouraging effective talk and challenge during debates. The literature review suggested that one extremely effective way to inject challenge and engagement into RE lessons was to encourage pupils to question or challenge their peers. When planning the first lesson collaboratively with the other two teachers, the Head of Drama suggested that the starter activity could involve pupils being given a position in relation to the statement 'No religious person should ever get divorced.'

This form of learning activity, using role play, is one that was used throughout the lessons, and the impact it had on motivation and engagement was significant. For example, before this research, Tom would always refuse to make contributions orally. He sat silently, only willing to write. I was keen to examine the impact that role play had on his motivation and engagement. He explained after the first lesson:

'I feel nervous when we have to present individually, because… I have this feeling that they will make fun of me.'

However, by the last lesson, he volunteered to deliver a speech, in role as a Muslim who supported the use of contraception. He described this as the part of the lesson that he enjoyed and learnt the most:

'It was good when we had to challenge because it made us think on the spot if we were delivering the speech and got challenged.'

This idea, that allowing pupils to question their peers in role injects challenge, is supported by both my own, as well as my colleague's, observation notes. We all make it explicit that this is a key part of the lesson in terms of learning:

'Yaris challenged and fed back well when asked to lead questioning.'

Similarly, the Head of Drama noted:

'Lucy challenged the Catholic speaker with a question during the debate, asking, 'But do you not think it would be the lesser of two evils to use contraception if the woman's health was at risk?'

Tom went on to explain that, when pupils are given the opportunity to discuss or debate within role:

'It feels less strict and you open up a bit more and bring in ideas without being scared.'

Linked to the suggestion that role play instils a sense of fearlessness and confidence in learners when debating is the claim that this has a direct impact on their writing skills. This is something that is evident throughout the analysis, particularly when looking at the written reflections made by the Head of English during lesson 3. She stated:

> *'Their writing has improved significantly and showed an ability to acknowledge the views of others with complex evidence to support these views, as well as their own.'*

Therefore, this data analysis suggests that the use of role play is invaluable within Year 9 RE, due to the fact that it encourages pupils to take part in debate, increasing the range of viewpoints they are able to absorb.

Collaboration

In relation to collaboration between pupils within lessons, there is a wealth of evidence within this research that demonstrates the impact collaborative learning activities can have on motivation and engagement. For example, pupils were often asked to work in small groups preparing a speech as they entered the room. When commenting on the parts of a lesson he was learning the most from, Tom stated:

> *'When we are discussing something, it feels less strict and you open up a bit more and bring in ideas without being scared.'*

Similarly, during lesson 2, pupils were asked to carousel around the room in groups, interviewing different religious experts. Again, Tom viewed this as most important in terms of learning; he explained:

> *'Going to the different tables, because they gave different views on the different Christian attitudes, because it helped me understand why Catholics, Evangelical or Liberal Christians feel the way they do towards homosexuality.'*

Finally, Yaris also explained:

> *'I learnt most by having discussions with people and comparing notes with people with the same characters as me.'*

This evidence might suggest that it is important for teachers to facilitate learners 'to use conversation to develop their own thoughts,' (Zwiers and Crawford, 2001:15) or generate knowledge through co-collaboration (Watkins et al., 2007). This is because oral communication is 'one of the main avenues for developing critical thinking skills,' (Reznitskaya et al., 2007) that is not only crucial within RE, but also vital for pupils to become successful members of society.

Group dynamics

Another interesting theme that has emerged from the analysis, which is closely linked to the effectiveness of collaborative learning, relates to group dynamics. During lesson 1's starter activity, pupils were asked to work in pairs to create a speech in response to a statement on divorce, from the viewpoint of a given character. When asked to comment on any parts of the lesson they felt were not effective in terms of learning, Lucy stated:

> *'I didn't like the task where we had to work in pairs to prepare the speech because me and my partner did not really work well together.'*

Interestingly, staff reflections also picked up on this:

> *'During this task, she rotated her body almost to insinuate that she was not happy about having to work with another person.'*

Similarly, the Head of Drama observed that:

> *'Lucy… seemed to struggle working in a group as she didn't really like sharing ideas with others.'*

From these reflections and post-lesson discussions with colleagues and pupils, it was possible to identify a potential cause of Lucy's lack of motivation and engagement during many of the lessons, as that of group dynamics. Lucy was a pupil who struggled to work with many of the boys within the class. Through collaboration with colleagues, and involvement of pupils within the monitoring and review of learning, Lucy's needs were able to be catered for in the next lesson. She was placed with close friends and assigned a clear role as an Evangelical Christian. When asked to reflect on which parts of the lesson she found most useful in terms of learning, she stated:

'The part where some people got roles, for example you are an Evangelist and you had to answer questions and try to give some information from an Evangelist's point of view.'

This analysis has also emphasised the importance of paired talk, as a means of instilling confidence into seemingly unmotivated pupils before asking them to engage in larger-group, or whole-class discussion. It has also highlighted just how crucial it is to know your learners and consider social aspects of learning, so that you can plan for effective collaborative activity.

4.5 | Reflection

This research project will have significant implications for my practice, my department and whole school improvement. Firstly, although the research targets pupils in Year 9 religious education lessons, I do believe that the conclusions it draws surrounding the use of role play, group dynamics, collaboration and learner-driven learning and the impact these have on motivation and engagement, could be applied to any year group. I recently incorporated the findings when planning an Ofsted lesson in October 2012, where I used role play and thought carefully about group dynamics throughout, to generate debate and effective talk through collaboration. This resulted in the inspector grading my lesson as 'Outstanding' in terms of learning and progress. Therefore, I am already able to identify the benefits that a culture of learner-driven learning can have on my practice.

This action research has allowed me to fully understand the numerous benefits for professional development when working collaboratively with colleagues. From our first planning session, we shared personal experiences of the learning activities that we found most effective when motivating pupils, for example, the use of students as envoys or plenaries such as 'I couldn't disagree more', which involves pupils facing each other in a line and challenging their partner's view on a given statement. I was able to incorporate these into my planning, providing me with a larger pool of learning activities to use in my day-to-day practice. The data has shown that the collaborative nature of the research has improved our understanding of how to cater for individual pupil needs. As the Head of English explained when celebrating Karl's progress:

> *'I am sure this process has enabled me to fully understand his needs and how to plan for these.'*

Secondly, the research project has been invaluable in terms of providing pupils with a greater stake in their learning. Student-teacher relationships have developed remarkably and the pupils involved have felt valued, increasing their sense of belonging and motivation to learn.

In terms of whole-school advice, I believe it is crucial for staff to be provided with more opportunities for collaborative planning and informal observation in learning trios. My experiences would suggest that the learning of both colleagues and pupils would be developed if our school could become a learning community where teachers and pupils collaborate together to plan, monitor and review learning.

I intend to use the findings from this research to ensure that my department embeds the use of role play and small group collaboration into their schemes of work to encourage debate and engagement within humanities lessons.

References

Dweck, C. (1999) *Self theories: their role in motivation, personality, and development*. Hove: Psychology Press.

Neuman, W. (2006) *Basics of social research: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Canada: Pearson Education.

Ofsted (2012) *St Mark's Church of England Academy inspection report*, 3 October 2012.

Reznitskaya, A., Anderson, R. & Kuo, L. (2007) 'Teaching and learning argumentation.' *Elementary school journal*, 107 (5), 449–472.

Watkins, C., Carnell, E. & Lodge, C. (2007) *Effective learning in classrooms*. London: Sage.

Zwiers, J. & Crawford, M. (2001) *Academic conversations: classroom talk that fosters critical thinking and content understandings*. Portland ME: Stenhouse.

5

The impact of EAL (English as an additional language) withdrawal groups on pupils' progress

Safijo Jimale and Ewa Czarnecka

5.1 | Overview

St Mark's Academy has a relatively high rate of students with English as an additional language (EAL); such students often have difficulty accessing the English curriculum. The EAL department has been working closely with the main subject teachers to support the needs of EAL pupils: the department delivers lessons to those pupils who cannot access the curriculum due to limited English vocabulary and to those pupils who have never had any formal schooling.

In the academic year 2012/13, the casual admission intake to the department was approximately 50 pupils and most of these pupils arrived from abroad. From this cohort, half of the pupils had a reading age of four years or more below their chronological age (with a difference of seven to eight years in some cases).

The aim of the withdrawal system is to assist and develop the literacy and numeracy skills of EAL students, in order to enable them to better access the curriculum.

The aim of this research was to explore the benefits of the withdrawal system – particularly from the viewpoint of the children who receive EAL support through this system. It also attempted to highlight where EAL withdrawal appears to have the most and least impact, and how it could be improved in the future.

5.2 | Context

The EAL department conducts an initial assessment when pupils arrive at the
academy; this is carried out to determine their literacy abilities. Pupils who cannot
access the mainstream curriculum are then withdrawn from classes and are placed
in withdrawal groups. These pupils are then assigned to one of four groups and
are taught by bilingual teachers or support teachers according to their needs. The
groups are as follows:

1. **Beginners:** those who cannot communicate through spoken or written
   English and are unable to recognise basic words in English, or those who
   have no formal education (especially those from conflict-affected states
   such as Afghanistan or Somalia). Within lessons, these pupils:

   • put words together to form phrases/simple sentences in English (even
     though spelling and sentence structure may still be irregular)

   • gain some awareness of full stops and capital letters

   • learn how to use some simple description (colour, size)

   • practise how to make their writing readable

   • practise the repetition of key words

   • learn how to write legibly with letters clearly shaped and correctly
     orientated.

2. **Starters:** these students are able to communicate basic literacy through
   spoken or written English (to the teacher) but are not able to express
   themselves effectively. They focus on:

   • linking ideas together within a small paragraph

   • writing more lengthy sentences although grammatical constructions may
     still show evidence of EAL

   • spelling simple words correctly and using phonetically plausible spelling
     strategies for longer words

   • using a wider vocabulary, with a variety of adjectives.

3. **Intermediate:** these students are able to function at Level 2 and 3 in English (DfE, 2011). These students will focus on:

   • sentence-level activities that encourage them to form compound sentences

   • categorising activities

   • ordering statements

   • writing simple instructions using adverbs such as: 'firstly', 'secondly', 'next', 'then' and 'finally'

   • writing captions for story boards

   • describing pictures.

4. **English for speakers of other languages (ESOL):** these students are able to write and read but have limited academic literacy skills – especially comprehension. Students are in Key Stage 4 and will be entered for additional/different qualifications.

The EAL department assesses the pupils termly to evaluate their progress in literacy; this is done through writing. Reading levels are then determined by the teacher and pupils who have made progress will move to the next stage. If a pupil has not made any progress additional intervention to enhance their reading and writing skills is put in place. The reading intervention can be done during coaching time or enrichment.

5.3 │ Methods

The aims of the research were as follows:

1. To investigate the impact of withdrawal groups on pupil progress.

2. To explore factors that make withdrawal groups successful:

   a. To investigate whether withdrawal groups are beneficial for accessing the curriculum

   b. To specify areas of potential benefit of withdrawal for EAL students

   c. To investigate whether subject area teaching is beneficial for withdrawal groups.

The method adopted for this project involved interviewing pupils and teachers, and undertaking observation of pupils completing certain activities. A series of semi-structured interviews was carried out in order to gain pupils' and teachers' opinions on the effectiveness of the withdrawal system. EAL (withdrawal group) pupils were interviewed to access their opinions on the subject areas they believed they had improved in as a result of taking part in the withdrawal system. Pupils with reading ages of four years or more below their chronological age were also questioned, as the research aimed to develop literacy skills among this group in particular.

Guided questions were used, for example:

- Do you think the intervention from the EAL department helps you to make good progress in your learning?

- Which subject area do you think you have improved the most in?

- What subject area do you believe you need more support in?

- How do you think we can help you in your subject areas to reach your target level?

- How do you think this withdrawal has developed your attitude to learning?

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used as they provide the advantage of 'adaptability', enabling the interviewer to 'follow-up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings' (Bell, 2005: 157). This allowed some in-depth discussion during the interview, whilst still adhering to a relatively structured process. In total, ten pupils were chosen to participate in the interview phase. This was done in the first term of the school year, to gain an insight into how pupils were benefitting from the withdrawal system and how this programme could be tailored to meet their needs. The interview began with simple questions which asked for pupils' personal opinions about the withdrawal system. These then built up to more complex questions which required the respondents to consider their own personal views and opinions in more detail. Thus the interview consisted of a mix of questions, allowing opportunities for both factual responses and more open-ended answers (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000).

The aim of the teacher interviews was to find out the degree of progress that withdrawal pupils made in their subject; their opinions were also requested on improvements that could be made to the system. This interview was conducted in the second term of the school year to enable adjustments to be put in place in the third term. Questions were asked about pupils' confidence and interaction with other classmates.

Observation was used in conjunction with the student interviews to assess pupils' attitude to learning. Pupils were interviewed about the effectiveness of a group task that they were asked to complete within a limited timeframe. This involved them completing some reading comprehension, spelling tasks, punctuation activities, application of number tasks and real-life-context science activities. Notes were taken on their willingness to participate and their interaction with other group members. This was done during the first term of the school year and again after adjustments to the withdrawal system in term 2.

5.4 | Key findings

Student interviews

The results from the pupil interviews illustrated that all the participants believed they had benefited from the withdrawal system and agreed that their literacy skills had improved. From the data gathered, it was clear that over half the pupils believed they had improved in English, a third saw an improvement in science and one in mathematics. However, eight out of ten pupils agreed that more support was still needed in English.

As a result of the withdrawal system, five out of ten pupils said that they interacted more in lessons by answering more questions, whilst three out of ten believed that they led more in lessons. The main theme to emerge from these interviews was that pupils believed there should be a stronger focus on literacy interventions as they needed this to further develop their literacy skills.

Teacher interviews

After analysing the results from the teacher interviews, eight out of ten teachers believed that the intervention carried out by the EAL staff made students feel confident in their grasp of subject knowledge. It can also be concluded that these EAL pupils develop understanding of key words and are therefore more able to solve problems. Two teachers also expressed views that the EAL staff helped pupils to develop better social skills; hence pupils were more confident when interacting with other non-EAL pupils. Two out of ten teachers were unsure of how the EAL staff supported EAL pupils. However, more generally, teachers expressed the view that EAL staff are needed – to spend more time with EAL pupils in lessons. The teacher interviews also showed that teachers believed that the EAL pupils' chance of reaching their target level was 3 on a scale from 1 to 4 (4 being the strongest). Five out of ten agreed that these pupils stood a high chance of achieving their target level by the end of the year as a result of subject-specific withdrawal groups. Five out of ten believed that pupils could meet their target level with some more support; these teachers expressed the view that pupils required more support to achieve their target, as targets were not always accurately based on pupils' needs. All ten of the teachers said that the EAL withdrawal group should be given more English support. Two teachers suggested that the EAL withdrawal group should be given support in all the core subjects (mathematics, English and science).

All teachers believed that the multicultural EAL staff influenced pupils' confidence in all aspect of life, such as socialising. Staff help to boost their confidence and they inspire them as role models. This study also showed that pupils were well looked after by the EAL multicultural staff in terms of education and well-being. The teachers who were interviewed suggested improvements to the withdrawal system by collaborative and joint planning with different departments. Of the ten teachers, seven thought that collaborative planning between the teachers and EAL staff could improve the withdrawal system. One teacher thought that the EAL department should liaise with the literacy coordinator to plan the literacy EAL curriculum. One teacher suggested that the EAL teachers should be able to support pupils during examinations.
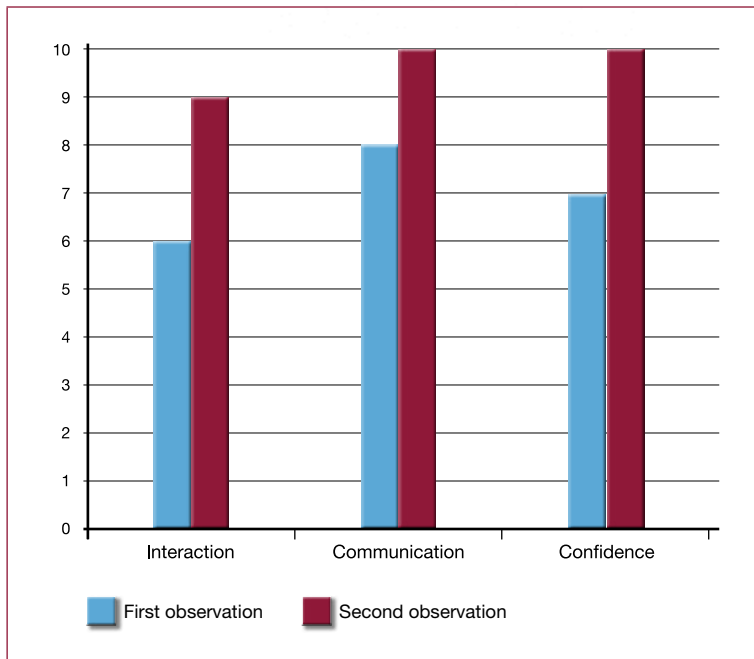
Observation of pupils

The first observation of the group showed that after three weeks on the withdrawal programme, six out of ten pupils interacted well with non-EAL pupils and teachers, in comparison to just one out of ten at the beginning of the programme. Pupils answered more questions, participated more readily in group activities and worked more independently. The other four pupils, who did not interact well with their classmates and teachers, had had a very limited formal education background. The withdrawal system was developed to encourage more integration by allowing pupils to work as a group; helping them to develop their social skills and communication.

Communication was developed after the first three weeks on the withdrawal programme. Eight of the ten pupils communicated well with teachers and other classmates. They were able to explain their answers independently, ask questions during the lesson and offer help to other pupils. The two pupils who did not communicate very well were given a tailored programme to include more activities involving both speaking and leading the class.

Increased confidence was evident in seven of the withdrawal pupils during the observation. Pupils went to the teacher readily to ask questions and often put their hands up to answer questions during class discussion. They also offered to support other EAL students when they needed it.

In all cases described above, observations were carried out by one teacher, and pupils' relative interaction/communication/confidence were assessed against a basic framework. As a result, these figures are indicative and, due to the subjective nature of the data collection, only suggestive of improvement rather than being definitive.

**Figure 4: Number of pupils observed by teachers exhibiting characteristics of
interaction, communication and confidence at two observation points**

Final observation

This was carried out during term 2 for two hours. During this session, all ten
pupils communicated very well with teachers and classmates. They completed
levelled, written and oral tasks effectively without the support of EAL staff. This
also demonstrated confidence as they did not need encouragement. All the pupils
participated in the activities and interacted well; however, one pupil did not interact
as well as the other pupils: she would not volunteer help to her other classmates
or suggest answers. However, when a question was directed at her she answered
readily, and the conclusion was made that this pupil is of a shy nature.

5.5 | Reflection

This research suggests that the withdrawal system has benefited students. The diagram above (Figure 4) shows an increase in the attributes observed throughout the pupils' enrolment in the withdrawal system. Our finding shows that substantial educational gains are possible for pupils where there is an effective withdrawal system for those who are learning EAL. Pupils who would not normally participate in an activity due to a literacy or social barrier enjoyed answering questions, helping other pupils, contributing to group tasks and working independently. The results from the data suggest that using a tailored withdrawal system and monitoring pupils' progress can improve pupils' literacy skills. For this system to be more effective, subject teachers and EAL support staff should collaborate (time permitting) in their planning. This will inform the class teacher about the content being covered and level of complexity within withdrawal lessons. One teacher stated:

'EAL support staff should liaise more with the literacy coordinator to clarify what is being taught in withdrawal sessions.'

5.6 | Conclusion

The study set out to analyse the effectiveness and benefits of the withdrawal
system that EAL children receive throughout each academic year. In conclusion,
the withdrawal system offered to EAL pupils appears to be effective; after the
program pupil progress was evident and, in particular, this progress seemed to
occur across the three main subject areas of English, maths and science. Yet, the
data from the interviews suggest some improvements to the withdrawal system
could be made. For the system to be more effective the EAL teachers should liaise
with the Literacy Coordinator to collaborate and cater directly for the literacy needs
of EAL withdrawal pupils. It is also a recommendation that EAL withdrawal pupils
should lead the learning in a lesson, whenever possible, in order to build their
confidence in controlling their own learning.

References

Bell, J. (2005) *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social science*. London: Open University Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000) *Research methods in education* (5th edition). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

DfE (2011) *English: attainment target level descriptors*. [online] Available from: http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/primary/b00198874/english/attainment [Accessed August 2013]

6

An examination of the transition from Year 11 to Year 12

Eva Kingcome

6.1 | Overview

The focus of this research was to explore the transition from Year 11 to Year 12 at St Mark's Academy. Post-16 education brings with it a different set of challenges, skills and variables that are not present at Key Stage 4; as a teacher of Key Stage 4 (KS4) and Key Stage 5 (KS5), I wanted to explore and identify the issues students, staff and the academy face, in order to recommend alternative strategies that would make the transition as smooth and effective as possible.

6.2 | Context

St Mark's Academy was conceived as a 'fast-track' academy in 2006 and incorporated a sixth form in 2007. Historically, the academy has been dogged by a catalogue of challenging contextual and cultural circumstances – three headteachers were appointed over four years, there was a high staff turnover and poor results (far below the National Challenge benchmark) until its stabilisation with the introduction of a new headteacher with a strategic vision. Results began to rise: in 2012/13, 52 per cent of GCSEs were graded A*-C, including English and mathematics, and in October 2012 Ofsted judged the academy as 'Good'.

Currently, there are 811 students on roll, serving a community within inner London that experiences significant socio-economic deprivation: 47 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, twice the national average; 36 per cent of pupils' first language is not English – the national average is 12 per cent; and 33 per cent of pupils have learning difficulties, against a national average of 20 per cent. In 2012, 31 per cent of Year 11 were on the SEN (special educational needs) register.

Despite a challenging start, the data suggests that St Mark's Academy sixth form is on an upward trend: 2013 A2-level results are up by 19 per cent (the percentage of A2-levels receiving grades A*-C is 63 per cent) and BTEC results up 26 per cent (the percentage of BTEC qualifications marked at Merit level is 79 per cent).

However, the data also flags up that AS results at the end of Year 12 are lower than in 2012 (and are 18 per cent lower than teacher predictions) and retention into Year 13 is poor. BTEC results reflect a considerable improvement between 2011 and 2012, although this figure is predicted to drop. The upward trend in BTEC results highlights that these courses match students' abilities but AS results continue to fall well below national averages of 97.8 per cent and, compared to similar schools, the sixth form is very still small.

Figure 5: St Mark's Academy sixth form details (2007–2013)

	2007–2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012	2012/2013
Number of sixth form pupils on roll	106	97	38	41	57
Pupils in Year 12	93	71	25	28	35
Pupils in Year 13	13	26	13	13	22
AS-levels at grades A-C	4%	3%	2%	42%	23%
BTEC qualifications at Merit level	23%	22%	39%	83%	52% (predicted)

As an experienced KS5 teacher, fully aware of the importance of new beginnings to engage, enthuse, inspire and induct sixth-form students, particularly as they embark on a fresh stage in their education, and the contextual journey of the academy and its students, I believe, as do other members of staff, that a successful transition from KS4 to KS5 is integral to students' and the sixth form's success. A recent Ofsted report noted that:

'The sixth form is good. Numbers of students are low but continue to grow. Students' achievement is good.'

(Inspection report: St Mark's Academy, 3-4 October 2012).

However, the Vice Principal, in charge of KS5, has stated on the academy website:

'Sadly... our AS results are still an area for development.'

This encapsulates the importance and urgency to equip our sixth-form students better with key skills to succeed at KS5.

6.3 | Methods

Practitioner action research was employed, using mixed methods to capture both qualitative and quantitative data through asking questions, observing actions and extracting evidence from documents.

The main method used was questionnaires: one for students and one for staff, with a mixture of open and closed questions. The students' questionnaire was longer, more detailed and more structured, to provide focused and systematic responses including quantitative data; the questionnaires afforded both staff and students room to develop their own views.

In addition, a range of staff were interviewed, including the Vice Principal in charge of KS5, the sixth form coordinator, heads of department and teaching staff, to widen the discussion. Additionally, as a localised study and an integral participant, I sampled my own AS English literature group, thus securing a broad range of responses, allowing me, as a KS5 teacher, to draw upon pupil voice to explore their views on the transition process, whilst simultaneously monitoring how effectively students were coping with the transition from KS4 to KS5, especially in terms of choice of subject, workload, study skills, daily routine and attainment. To encourage a good response rate, the aims of the research and questionnaires were shared with participants, as was the significance of their role in this project.

6.4 | Key findings

Of the students interviewed, 60 per cent had elected to continue their post-16 education at St Mark's because they 'felt secure here', had friends, knew the teachers and did not 'want to restart the whole process'; 17 per cent were new to the sixth form (it had been recommended by friends or was close to home); and 23 per cent had, within the first half-term, returned to St Mark's from larger sixth form colleges, claiming they found the impersonal 'freer' approach and size of college destabilising factors, preferring the small and familiar. It was clear that social concerns and familiarity prompted the majority of students to remain at or return to St Mark's, as students felt comfortable within this sixth form environment.

A study by Hope (2007) identified four key transitional areas of concern for students:

- academic

- social

- daily routine

- personal (occurrence of personal problems within student's life).

This research flagged up issues which largely only fell within the academic and daily routine categories; although prior to joining the sixth form, a key issue students had struggled with was 'Would I actually get the grades to come to St Mark's?' (expressed by 75 per cent of respondents).

Responses as to the advice received about sixth form subjects/choices, prior to joining, varied from 'yes, good' to 'reasonable' to 'needs to be better.' However, the majority agreed interview pathway discussions had focused too much on the 'what': what courses involved – the advantages and disadvantages of future career opportunities and universities – rather than on the practical element of how students should prepare themselves to cope with the subject-specific changes and challenges of sixth form teaching and learning. Both students and staff (100 per cent) concurred that choice of course is key to student success – within the AS English group three out of ten students, those with very low Cs in English GCSE, experienced problems in this area within the first half-term; staff teaching the business studies BTEC claimed over 50 per cent of students were not ready for their course. 100 per cent of sixth form staff believed St Mark's sixth form selection needs to be more stringent to mitigate Year 12 drop-out.

But the overriding academic issue that caused student concern was workload – 88 per cent of pupils cited this as a key issue. Over 50 per cent of students claimed to struggle with the increase in workload and using their time effectively. Studies suggest students and staff underestimate this issue. Smith, in his action research report (2010), stated: 'There is a misconception… that students need less guidance, support and control within the classroom.' He believed teachers generalise that because students wear their own clothes, are slightly older and have chosen your subject, they will have the language and skills to move themselves forward. The evidence suggested St Mark's was somewhat complicit in this generalisation too.

All the staff interviewed agreed the two biggest transitional issues facing St Mark's students, after subject choice, were 'study skills', (particularly independent study skills) and 'time management', alongside others such as not knowing how to take notes, or even organise subject files rather than exercise books or manage the change in the school routine. Students found it hard to cope with several subject teachers and balance different expectations, deadlines and teaching styles, especially the pre-university lecture-style format. Students' inability to use independent time constructively and practically was a key problem. Anecdotally it was widely known that students spent a considerable amount of their free time in the sixth form common room without any real focus, motivation or understanding of how they should best use their time. This is a vital issue that St Mark's sixth form needs to review in its transition process. Staff overwhelmingly believed (93 per cent) that Year 11 students were too cocooned and shielded from independent study skills due to the pressures of achieving target grades, and consequently struggled at KS5. Previous research on St Mark's homework culture confirmed students had little practice of home and independent study (Whitby et al., 2012: 17). The academy needs to embed these skills at the lower key stages to better equip students for KS5.

Time management was a key problem, with over 70 per cent of students admitting they were unable to manage their non-contact time purposefully, which in turn caused fluctuations in some students' personal routines, in relation to punctuality, attendance, absenteeism and even boredom. Three out of seven of the AS English literature group struggled with punctuality and attendance; two of those students developed conflicts at home as a result. The graph below reflects how students used their non-contact time.

Figure 6: What students did in their non-contact time (multiple answers allowed)
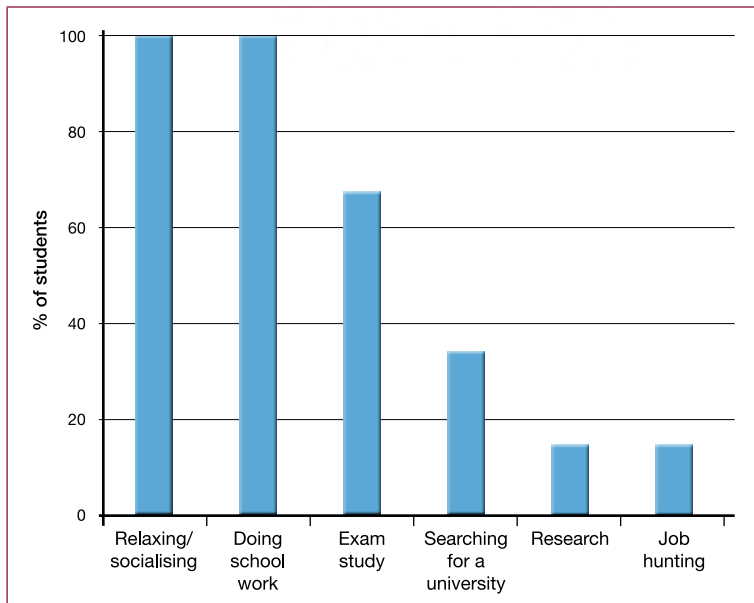
Student reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the sixth form induction programme were varied. Though interviewed in spring 2013, many students could not clearly remember the sixth form induction programme: one student thought it lasted a whole week, another two days. It appeared clear that, to the students, this again was about the 'what' rather than the 'how'.

Some responses to strengths and weaknesses of sixth form induction programme:

'It made me look forward to sixth form.'
'It reminded me it was a new start.'
'It was time to meet my friends.'
'It warned me about workload.'
'I think it should have been longer.'
'About punctuality and attendance.'
'It was mostly about rules.'
'I know it put me in the right mind set.'

If a definition of the word 'induction' is *training*, then this is exactly what the induction programme should do: train students *how* to cope with the new challenges of the sixth form.

Interestingly, over 90 per cent of Year 12 students felt disassociated from the rest of the school, unaware of many of the events and issues taking place. Furthermore, 100 per cent of staff interviewed, who did not teach sixth form, claimed they too were disconnected from the sixth form.

6.6 | Conclusion

Though St Mark's was judged 'Good' at the last Ofsted Inspection in 2012, the academy overall still has to improve the quality of teaching and learning and continue to raise attainment across all key stages if it is to reach 'Outstanding', and the sixth form has an important role to play in that journey. This research only scratches the surface, yet it clearly suggests that St Mark's needs to refine its sixth form transition and monitoring processes to support students to achieve their full potential. There follows a series of recommendations based upon the findings of this research project.

Recommendations

1. Heads of department should be actively involved in the sixth form interview process, whether on the panel or in subsequent discussions to ensure students' chosen pathways match their ability and needs as realistically as possible. This would minimise student and subject drop-out early on in Year 12.

2. An induction programme, lasting between one and two weeks, organised in conjunction with the Head of KS5, the sixth form coordinator, sixth form tutors and subject leaders, could be an 'event' with a range of academic and social activities to *induct* students in the skills required at KS5. Some students felt there should be a distinction between the A-level and BTEC skills and expectations. This investment of time will be very beneficial in the long run if it serves to develop key study skills to support sixth form students.

   Subject teachers also have to take on board the need to advise and monitor students in how to manage their 'subject time', with clearly guided activities and tangible deadlines.

3. Timetables should be ready by the start of autumn term to avoid demotivation while clashes are sorted out. One member of staff suggested students' timetables should be fully populated: non-contact time should be timetabled as study time, with a classroom or appropriate study area, a method often employed in boarding schools. Thus students would have the expectation of independent study and teachers' would be able to track students' attendance and progress.

4. The profile of the sixth form as a whole needs to be raised, so that its members feel that they are integral to the academy. Year 12 students (and Year 13) should have a much higher profile across the school and be given posts of responsibility; they could be actively involved in whole-school events, provide support in the new Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, serve as prefects, monitor break duties, run assemblies, buddy with students struggling in their chosen field, or act as mentors or school ambassadors – this could support their CVs, personal statements and job applications and encourage sixth formers to be more proactive in academy life, thereby enabling them to act as role models for the lower school. It would also serve to populate students' timetables with constructive practical activities.

5. The re-introduction of a 'Critical Thinking' course of study could also develop students' general knowledge, confidence, discursive and analytical skills. Additionally, students with slightly lighter timetables might be encouraged to complete action research projects.

6. Likewise, to increase the effectiveness of sixth form teaching, continuing professional development (CPD) should be introduced for staff to prepare them for the demands of post-16 teaching, an area identified by Ofsted as lacking in many schools.

What is abundantly clear is that the transition from KS4 to KS5 cannot merely be a 'one-off' event but needs to be a range of systems consistently in place to identify and gauge the needs of students, at least throughout Year 12. It is this long-term continuity that staff believed was lacking at St Mark's; the assumption that sixth form skills can be learned in a set introductory period is unrealistic and unhelpful.
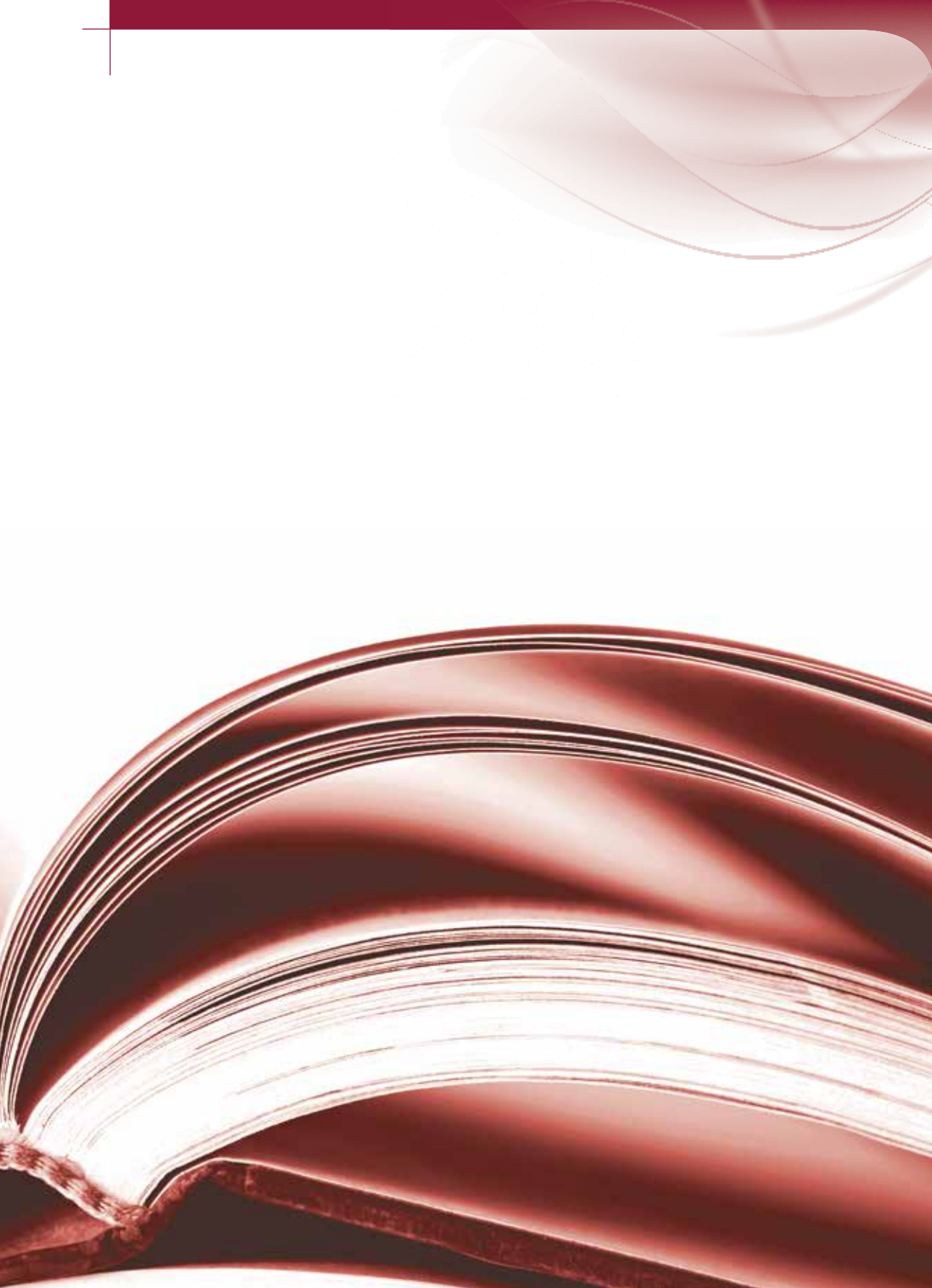
References

Hope, A. (2007) *From secondary school to sixth form* [online] Available from: **http://www.school-portal.co.uk/GroupDownloadFile.asp?GroupId=783552&ResourceID=2396583** [Accessed August 2013]

Smith, P. (2010) *An investigation into effective sixth form teaching* [online] Available from: **http://www.farlingaye.suffolk.sch.uk/Information/LeadingEdge/** [Accessed August 2013]

Whitby, K., Peterkin, L. and Douse, O. (2012) *Action research at St Mark's Academy 2012.* Reading: CfBT Education Trust.