

Action research at St Mark's Academy

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Edited by Karen Whitby





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We have worked successfully to implement reform programmes for governments throughout the world. Government clients in the UK include the Department for Education, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted); and local authorities. Internationally, we work with education ministries and their equivalents in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Singapore among many others.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in educational research and development. Our research programme – Evidence for Education – aims to improve educational practice on the ground and widen access to research in the UK and overseas.

Welcome to St Mark's Academy



St Mark's Church of England Academy opened on 1 September 2006. As an Academy, St Mark's is independently governed but state-funded and free for students. It is subject, like other schools, to regular inspections, but is managed by an 'Academy Trust' rather than a local education authority. The Trust is a registered charity, established by the sponsors.

Students receive an all-round education, studying the full range of subjects within a curriculum designed to make sure they get the best out of their education and are fully prepared for adult life.



Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Paul Maven for the photographs of students at St Mark's Academy.

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Contents

Foreword	4
Introduction	7
1 The impact of creative curriculum models on student enjoyment and achievement	11
2 Assessment for learning and how it influences student progress and enjoyment in lessons	19
3 An investigation of the factors that influence students' decision to study languages as a GCSE option at St Mark's Academy	25
4 What makes good learning for our Year 10?	29
5 Refining the casual admissions process	35

Foreword

Dr Geraldine Hutchinson, Chair of Governors

It is very appropriate that this action research emanated from a group of teachers at St Mark's Academy, who met on a cold autumn day to plan a strategy for how they were going to work together to improve standards of teaching and learning. At the time, the whole idea of 'action research' seemed rather ambitious for what was going to be a group of teachers meeting up regularly to share best practice. Yet it was quickly apparent that the driver for this research was not only a shared purpose to improve and raise the quality of the learning experience for the pupils in the Academy, but also a desire on the part of the teachers to work together to take 'ownership' of this task. Enthusiasm for the task has been maintained over the school year and this way of working has now become embedded, as working groups from across subjects regularly meet to plan new approaches to learning and school management.

Certainly, in completing this research, these teachers have put knowledge to practical use in their day-to-day work in classrooms. They have also shared their learning with one another and with pupils, so that their research and practice have been linked and their ideas tested in a realistic context. More importantly, this action research has created a bridge, not just between knowledge and application but also between teachers, subject disciplines and across roles. Empowering classroom practitioners is critically important to school improvement, and the teachers at St Mark's Academy are the direct link between teaching and the quality of the learning experience for every student. As Chair of Governors I have seen the significant improvements in standards of teaching and pupil attainment over the year, and the willingness of teachers to ask questions and to seek better ways of working has been a key factor in raising standards. CfBT Education Trust proactively supports the role of teacher practitioners in school improvement and recognises the importance of placing evidence-based practice at the heart of teaching and learning. Actively supporting this work has been a real pleasure.



Dr Geraldine Hutchinson

Chair of Governors, St Mark's Academy



Dr Geraldine Hutchinson
Chair of Governors, St Mark's
Academy

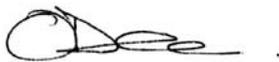
Lisa Peterkin, Vice Principal and
Olivia Douse, Assistant Headteacher, St Mark's Academy

The teaching and learning journey at St Mark's Academy has been characterised by a shift to a more collaborative, reflective and creative culture. This has enabled and empowered staff to re-focus on student learning and their role as facilitator of that learning. The practitioner research programme has been one strand of this journey. It has provided an excellent opportunity for teachers to use research as a vehicle for improving their practice and as a tool for reflection and self-evaluation. Teachers have explored topics that interest them and analysed data to draw conclusions. This has enabled them to make recommendations that will be shared across the Academy. We see teachers leading research as a key driver to whole-school improvement and our journey to becoming an outstanding institution.

We are delighted to present the outcomes of the practitioner research programme at St Mark's. It has been a pleasure to work in collaboration with our staff and CfBT, our lead sponsor. Our thanks go to Geraldine Hutchinson, Chair of Governors and Karen Whitby, CfBT Research Manager who have made this possible.



Lisa Peterkin
Vice Principal, St Mark's Academy



Olivia Douse
Assistant Headteacher, St Mark's Academy



PERSPECTIVE

Evidence Matters:

Towards informed professionalism in education

Andrew Morris

with a foreword by Professor Charles Desforges



Introduction

In the CfBT report *Evidence Matters: Towards informed professionalism for educators* Andrew Morris argues that in many parts of our lives we quite sensibly take it for granted that professional practices are based on sound evidence. He provides the example that one would feel *'badly let down if our building surveyor were merely expressing her personal feelings about the prospects for our damp-proof course or our social worker using his anecdotal experience to advise us about adopting a child'*.¹ Yet, as Morris points out, it is only relatively recently that even medical practice has become evidence based. He identifies that it was only in 1992 that the term *'evidence-based medicine'* first appeared in the medical literature. So to what extent is the teaching profession evidence based? Not much, argue Bryk and Gomez, who highlight that all too frequently, *'the pre-service preparation and socialization of teachers into the profession is typically devoid of significant exposure to educational statistics, research design, and measurement topics'*.² They go on to argue that *'teacher education programs and applied research activities within schools of education are often entirely separate enterprises'* and that therefore *'the research developed in the academy tends to be viewed by practitioners as primarily for other researchers'*. It is into this void of separate enterprises that the activity of practitioner research so nicely fits.

The roots of the practitioner research have been traced to the broader social justice movement within the post-modern paradigms of qualitative research.³ A more simple definition is provided by McLeod who defines practitioner research as *'research carried out by practitioners for the purpose of advancing their own practice'*.⁴ This differentiates practitioner research from other forms of research, as Marion Dadds explains: *'whilst the main purpose of research is to create new knowledge and understanding for us, to help us know something we did not previously know (Bassey, 1995), the additional and necessary purpose of practitioner research is to try as best we can to put that new knowledge to practical use'*. Dadds goes on to highlight that the traditional separation in research of 'new knowledge' from its purposeful application to life is, in principle, dissolved in practitioner research.

¹ Morris, A. (2009) *Evidence Matters: Towards informed professionalism in education*. Reading: CfBT Education Trust

² Bryk, A.S. and Gomez, L. (2008) 'Ruminations on Reinventing an R&D Capacity for Educational Improvement'. Prepared for the American Enterprise Institute Conference, Side of School Reform and the Future of Educational Entrepreneurship, 25 October 2007. Revised 2 January 2008.

³ See for example Anderson et al (2007); Greenwood and Levin (2003); Hollingsworth (1999); Kincheloe (2003)

⁴ McLeod, J. (1999) *Practitioner Research in Counselling*. London: Sage Publications

Yet it is this bridge between knowledge and application that provides the pathway for professional reflection and action to occur. Viewing the situation from the other perspective, Bryk and Gomez suggest that *'while considerable wisdom of practice is surely developed by educational practitioners through their daily work, there are no extant mechanisms to test, refine and transform this practitioner knowledge into a professional knowledge base'*.⁵

From this standpoint, practitioner research offers educational professionals an excellent opportunity for the reassertion of professionalism. Bottery states a five-point argument to this end:

1. By shifting the focus of research to the examination and solution of school-based problems, it should improve their practice, and hence raise their status.
2. By locating the focus of research within schools, it could raise the profile of the teaching profession with the general public, and could provide extended opportunities to acquaint the public with the issues with which teachers have to deal.
3. It would extend their expertise, and therefore their professional identity. Teachers could become in the eyes of the public as much researchers as implementers, with all the increased status that accrues to researchers.
4. It should, by making teachers more reflective and research-oriented practitioners, lead to more effective practice.
5. The research dimension of teaching could provide a focus for a more collaborative – and therefore more effective and influential – profession.⁶

So how prevalent is practitioner research? The 2008 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) surveyed teachers of lower secondary education and the principals of the schools in which they work in 24 countries (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Republic of Korea, Lithuania, Malta, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Turkey). The survey included a range of questions on the professional development that teachers undertake and its connection to appraisal systems, support from school leaders and impact on classroom practices.

⁵ Bryk, A.S. and Gomez, L. (2008) 'Ruminations on Reinventing an R&D Capacity for Educational Improvement.' Prepared for the American Enterprise Institute Conference, Side of School Reform and the Future of Educational Entrepreneurship, 25 October 2007. Revised 2 January 2008.

⁶ Bottery, M. (1997) Teacher Professionalisation through Action Research – possibility or pipe-dream? in *Teachers and Teaching*, 3: 2, 273–292

One of the most pertinent findings of this survey was that individual and collaborative research received the highest impact rating in terms of teachers' perceptions of their professional development. Yet, despite increased participation in recent years, research engagement as a form of development had one of the lowest teacher participation rates.⁷ Teachers most frequently reported being engaged with individual or collaborative research in Brazil (55%), Denmark (52%), Italy (57%) and Mexico (63%); it was much less common in Norway (12%) and the Slovak Republic (12%).⁸

Since the foundation of its *Evidence for Education* research programme, CfBT Education Trust has been committed to practitioner research. In 2010, CfBT published its first book solely dedicated to practitioner research projects, *Action Research in Abu Dhabi*. The book was a collection of practitioner research projects conducted by ten primary schools and kindergartens in Abu Dhabi. The book was a huge success and has inspired many teachers working in the region. The book was endorsed by the Abu Dhabi Education Council, whose Head of Research, Professor Masood Abdulla Badri, wrote in the foreword to the publication '*initiatives such as this encourage and empower our classroom practitioners*'.

With this in mind, CfBT offered other schools that it works with the opportunity to participate in their own practitioner research projects. As a result, teachers at St Mark's Academy, with which CfBT works as an Academy sponsor, participated in professional development workshops to learn how to conduct action research projects in educational settings. The training included: designing research questions; an introduction to qualitative and quantitative research methodologies; an overview of data analysis; and a brief discussion on research ethics. Following the training, five teachers decided that they would like to conduct an action research project.

The following chapters of this book have all been written by the teachers who participated in the practitioner research project. They each detail:

- the background to the research topic each chose and the reason they chose it
- the methodology that they selected
- the findings from their project
- conclusions and reflections on what was learnt and what might happen next.

⁷ OECD (2009) *Teaching and Learning International Survey: Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments*. Paris: OECD

⁸ Ibid.



The impact of creative curriculum models on student enjoyment and achievement

Olivia Douse

1.1 | Introduction

St Mark's Academy gained specialist status in science and performing arts in January 2009. The performing arts are a particular strength of the Academy, with performing arts students achieving some of the best results academically. Performing arts also attract high participation rates in extra-curricular activities, as well as being a popular option choice for students at Key Stage 4.

1.2 | Research aims

The research aimed to assess the impact of creative cross-curricular themed projects within the arts on student enjoyment and achievement in Year 7.

The intervention

The performing arts faculty (art, drama, music and dance) launched an innovative Year 7 performing arts curriculum, which involved students studying Afro-Caribbean art forms working towards the performance of a musical play entitled *The Story of Tufani*. The students were all given an introduction to the project for the first five weeks where they participated in introductory work in all arts areas, exploring Afro-Caribbean art forms including African dance, storytelling, mask and print making and djembe drumming. Following this, each student chose an art form to specialise in, which meant instead of attending art, drama and music lessons as normal, they attended three-hour workshops within that art form in the run-up to the final performance. This section of the project lasted for seven weeks culminating in a full one-day rehearsal and performance of the show to parents. The following day, students performed the piece to local primary schools. All students were allocated their first-choice art form, as the groups divided roughly evenly across the art forms. The different specialist teams focused on different aspects of the final performance but all students were involved in some way in the creation of the final product. The 'art team' focused on the props, costumes and stage design, the 'drama team' were the actors in the play, the 'music team' provided the accompanying music and sound effects and the 'dance team' performed dances in the play. Students kept diaries each week to evaluate their progress and completed research homework projects on their arts hero/heroine within their chosen art form. Each student went on to create a full portfolio of the project, which led to accreditation in Bronze Arts Award later in the summer term.

There were ten meetings of performing arts staff before, during and after the project. In addition, a special timetabling arrangement had been planned and put in place prior to the start of the academic year, meaning that Year 7 were in performing arts all afternoon on Tuesday and Thursday – which provided flexibility to enable a project of this kind to take place. The planning meetings involved:

- a. discussion and agreement of a central theme and the selection of the play
- b. exploring topics for the students to cover throughout the project
- c. creation of schemes of work which were shared across the faculty so that each subject group could see what other groups were doing
- d. planning for the logistics of the project
- e. discussion of how the project would enable students to meet the Arts Award criteria
- f. review meetings throughout the project
- g. evaluation at the endpoint.



1.3 | Methodology

The methodology for this project was practitioner action research. Several methods were employed to ensure accurate and broad capture of largely qualitative data. Qualitative approaches were deemed most appropriate given the nature of the research questions in that they concerned student enjoyment and achievement in the broadest possible sense. Indicators of 'achievement' included the development of personal and social skills (e.g. leadership, creativity, teamwork, communication etc.), progress within the chosen art form and the quality of the outcome. Indicators of enjoyment included student participation and the extent to which the students valued and took pride in their work. Some quantitative indicators were used through the questionnaires to verify the outcomes and impact.

One of the main methods used was a questionnaire, which sampled around 25 per cent of the participating students across all of the different art-form groups. All questionnaires were completed at the endpoint. The questionnaire used open-ended questions; asked students to identify which personal and social skills they felt they had been able to develop and say how; asked students to identify what they felt they had learnt through the project; and had a series of statements relating to the project with which students were able to strongly agree, agree, partially agree, disagree or strongly disagree. The risk of poorly completed questionnaires and lack of honest response was partially mitigated by making it very clear to students that honest responses were needed and talking students through the questionnaire in detail. Staff also completed a questionnaire. Additionally, visual data was gathered in the form of photos during the project and at the final performance. A journal of anecdotal comments was kept throughout the project to capture any significant student or staff comments. Learning walks were undertaken throughout the project, during which a number of students were spoken to and observed in action. As the project led to a final performance given to parents and local primary schools, audience comments and feedback were also gathered following the performances.

1.4 | Key findings

Student achievement

The outcomes of the research demonstrate that the project enabled students to make significantly more progress in their chosen art form than would otherwise be expected in the timeframe and had a positive impact on improving students' personal and social skills. The quality of the overall outcome was high, and above what would usually be expected by students at this stage in their artistic learning. For example, students were not only performing music but were composing it within specific styles. Students felt in particular that they had developed their teamwork, creativity and leadership skills. Staff agreed with the development of teamwork and creativity and also felt students had developed communication skills and self-confidence during the project.

Interestingly, when students were asked to comment on what they had learnt about their chosen art form, many cited further examples of how they had developed their personal and social skills rather than identifying specific arts skills they had developed. This was repeated across the different art forms, indicating it was the process and how they developed as learners that were the key achievements from their perspective, and the art form was a vehicle to enable this achievement. Staff, however, saw genuine improvement in the artistic skills of students and commented on how students were using their artistic skills in a more creative and expressive way. Interestingly, even though students specialised in an art form, they did learn about all the different art forms by seeing how the various strands fitted together and watching and critiquing their peers within the different art forms.

Many students commented on the fact that they had been able to work with new people through the project and that there was a real sense of teamwork throughout. Furthermore, students commented very positively that they felt as if they were co-constructors of the project and had an equal stake in the creative outcome, which enabled them to develop both their creativity skills and their ability to think independently. For example, students devised their own dances and decided independently how to design their masks and what colours to use.

Staff were very confident by the end of the project that students had been able to develop their art form skills and achieve higher standards in their art form than they would have otherwise. This was mirrored in the student comments – 80 per cent felt the project had enabled them to make good progress in their art form. This was interesting, as this was one of the staff's main concerns at the start of the project. Some were genuinely concerned about the impact that the project would have on student achievement, but by the end of the project, those staff were much more positive about the way of working and indicated that they would like to work that way in the future including with exam groups such as Year 10. There were lots of creative ideas for new projects emerging from staff at the final review meeting and many staff commented that it would be *'boring to return to the normal ways of working now'*.

Student enjoyment

Students showed high levels of engagement and participation throughout the project, which were key indicators that they were enjoying the project. There were often times when students continued to work into lunchtime to finish what they had started and many students cited the project as a real highlight of their week during conversations throughout the project. Parents also gave very positive feedback during a parents' evening which was held during the project. Learning walks during the sessions demonstrated high levels of engagement from students and there was a really positive vibe across the faculty. Staff were unanimous in agreeing that every child had been involved in some way, which further demonstrates high levels of engagement.

Students who were involved in performing on stage enjoyed the final performance of the project significantly more – a significant minority of the art students, for example, commented negatively on the final performance and said they hadn't really felt involved on the night. However, 80 per cent of students agreed that having a final performance to work towards made the project seem more worthwhile and valuable. Furthermore, students commented that working to a final performance inspired and motivated them to work harder because they knew they had a clear deadline to work towards and they didn't want to let the rest of their team (both subject teams and whole-year team) down. Staff and students were both in agreement that having longer to rehearse the final performance would have been valuable as this in itself was an intense learning experience which was perhaps not used to its greatest potential because it was so rushed. Interestingly, students set themselves and others in the year very high expectations – for example numerous students commented negatively on the fact that one or two students had forgotten their lines during the performance.

They were not very forgiving of each other and were very clear about how they wanted to see this improved. This arguably shows a real sense of ownership from students as they are setting themselves high expectations and demonstrating real pride in their work.

Students were positive about making links between the different art forms – 74 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed making these links. When asked to elaborate more on this, students said it was having a greater understanding of how the different subjects link together to create a final piece that was enjoyable and also seeing their work on display. Many of the students said they didn't often get an opportunity to link their subjects together and that they really enjoyed doing this.

There was some agreement between staff and students that even though there was better engagement throughout the project, student behaviour was not always better as a result of this. The three-hour sessions were at times hard to manage, particularly when groups of students didn't work well together or with specific groups which had a high proportion of challenging students in them. Staff and students both identified this as an area for further consideration next time.



1.5 | Conclusion

Overall, the project has demonstrated that working in a cross-curricular and creative way has a positive impact on student enjoyment and achievement on many different levels. In particular a 'real outcome' – in the form of a final performance – was a significant motivating factor and ensuring all students 'had a role' was really important. The project enabled students to develop creativity, leadership, teamwork and communication skills, and to become co-constructors in their learning. Students also set high expectations of themselves and others throughout the project, which demonstrated a real sense of pride in what they were doing. Additionally, an interesting outcome of the project was the increased motivation and 'buy-in' from teaching staff who were very positive about working in this way, showing real keenness to continue to develop other similar projects. Lines of communication have been developed between students, between staff and students and also between members of staff themselves.

This research has identified some key areas for developing the project. One of these is to ensure that all students feel part of the project at the final performance. This could involve, for example, the inclusion of a final song or performance in which all students perform. Groupings also need to be considered carefully as there were times when the longer lessons had a negative impact on student behaviour; both staff and students noted this. Timings need to be carefully considered when planning a project of this kind. There needs to be adequate time to properly rehearse for the final performance, as this in itself is a real learning experience. Students also need to have adequate time to prepare for the final performance without the project going on so long that they disengage. Further discussions could be had with regard to where the project is placed during the year, how long the initial introduction should last and how long students should work in specialist groups. It would be possible, for example, for students to spend two hours per week in their specialist group and the final hour experiencing the other art forms. These questions were beyond the scope of this research but are worth considering.

St Mark's will certainly use the findings of this research project to develop future projects. The performing arts team has already started to explore how we could work this way with Year 10 BTEC groups across the arts subjects to enable the students to meet their grading criteria. There are also plans to develop new creative curriculum projects across KS3, for example by exploring how further links could be made with subjects such as humanities, English and religious education.



Assessment for learning and how it influences student progress and enjoyment in lessons

Hannah Fahey and Lucy Brown

2.1 | Introduction

St Mark's Academy was opened in September 2006 after the closure of Mitcham Vale School, as an 11–16 Church of England Academy. A year later, in September 2007, a sixth form was introduced, making St Mark's an 11–18 Academy. Along with these fundamental school changes, the opening of St Mark's carried the challenge of eradicating a somewhat negative label.

In June 2009, following an Ofsted inspection, St Mark's was given 'notice to improve'. However, following the most recent inspection in September 2010, Ofsted described the school as '*a welcoming and harmonious community, where students are happy and safe, and make sound academic progress*' and it was graded as satisfactory.⁹ However, the inspection identified that one of the things that the school needed to do to improve further was: '*ensuring teachers use day-to-day assessments to provide activities that are challenging*' as well as '*intensifying the programme for spreading good practice in assessment throughout the academy, by coaching and mentoring*'. With this in mind, this project investigated whether staff competencies in Assessment for Learning (AfL) impact on pupil enjoyment and achievement.

2.2 | Research aims

The research aimed to identify the most effective way of using AfL for St Mark's students. In order to achieve this, the research looked at how outstanding practitioners use AfL effectively, in order to highlight how competent use of AfL by teachers directly impacts on student progress and enjoyment. It was also seen as an opportunity to allow students to voice their opinion on how they learn best; and to explore students' understanding of AfL.

⁹ Ofsted Report (2010) St Mark's Church of England Academy, Mitcham.

2.3 | Methodology

In order to gather evidence for this project, a range of different methods was used including observation, student questionnaires, student interviews and staff questionnaires.

Staff questionnaires and lesson observation

Four teachers from St Mark's Academy were chosen using the results from the most recent senior leadership team lesson observation data. One from each of the Ofsted rated categories was identified, so that the researchers would have a teacher who was seen to be: outstanding, good, satisfactory or unsatisfactory to focus the results on. The teachers selected were all from different subject areas (French, English, maths and science) and at a different stage in their teaching career.

Student interviews and questionnaires

It proved difficult to find students who were all taught by the same teacher – which would have been the ideal, as it would have given the researchers a good leveller. Instead it was decided to choose students who fell into specific target groups, to provide a picture of how teachers prepare and differentiate for these individuals. The key target groups of students were:

- High achieving students
- Students with English as an additional language
- Free school meals students
- Students with special educational needs.

No student was interviewed twice. It was also necessary to consider the cover implications of observing other teachers, so the researchers chose classes where minimal disruption would take place to their own teaching schedule. This meant that the lessons observed were from different age ranges. In an ideal scenario, the same year group would have been used.

Use of a video recording allowed us to gather insightful data that could be replayed and discussed at any time, and meant that the focus of observation could be directed towards pupils and their learning. All findings were anonymised.

2.4 | Key findings

Case Study 1

In this class, the EAL (English as an Additional Language) student seemed to take it very personally that the teacher kept pronouncing his name wrongly. This made all his responses about the lesson rather negative in comparison with the others. He was the only student who rated his progress as 'satisfactory' and suggested the one thing that would make the lesson better would be for the teacher to '*pronounce my name right*'; this was also the thing he liked least about the lesson. It seems to be that the relationship individual students have with their teacher is fundamental to their own perception about their progress and the enjoyment they get from participating in the lesson. Something as simple as getting the student's name right could make all the difference to how much progress they make.

Case Study 2

There was a noticeably different learning experience happening within this classroom. 'Student A' and 'Student C' both had a fairly positive experience within the lesson. They thought they were making 'good' progress and rated the lesson 5/10. It appeared that the more challenging students who required more specific and differentiated materials in order to access the work were not sufficiently provided for and as a result they felt they were making only 'satisfactory' progress at best. Both made comments about how the teacher engaged with them and felt they were often overlooked when it came to support in the lesson. This therefore had a direct result on their enjoyment of the lesson and the progress they made. The relationship between the student and the teacher is a crucial one and it seems that it is vital that the teacher provides sufficiently differentiated material for every student to enable them to feel that they are able to achieve and make progress within the lesson. The students suggested that they would work better if they were set group tasks or games that were related to the topic.

Case Study 3

On entering the classroom it was clear that there was a real 'buzz' in the room. The students were engaged and focused, but engaging in discussions and working in small groups. It was by no means a quiet and clinical place – students were enjoying the work that they were being asked to do. The teacher had made an effort to find ways of fuelling the students' interest and taking on a character himself to make the experience more enjoyable. The classroom had been specially set out, and the colour-coded tables made it very clear for a visitor to see the differentiated areas and students working with others of a similar ability. The teacher and students seemed to have an excellent rapport and both seemed to be enjoying the joint experience. The students were enjoying the lesson and as a result making good progress. The teacher had excellent questioning skills which clearly showed that he was very familiar with his class and the individual needs that they had.

The class were clearly acutely familiar with the routine of AfL and as a result could easily explain their current working levels and what they needed to do in order to get to the next one. The teacher used the simple thumbs-up strategy to check the understanding of the task. This was simple yet effective; he reinforced the AfL by asking the EAL student to repeat the task back to ensure that it had been clearly understood.

Case Study 4

The students seemed to really enjoy this lesson. They all clearly stated that they enjoyed lessons when they got to work practically and take part in experiments. This was a very small teaching group and the teacher obviously knew all of his students very well. There was also a teaching assistant present who was able to assist with the SEN and EAL students. There was a good rapport between the teacher and the whole class. Behaviour was good and the students clearly enjoyed being there.

Although no AfL whatsoever was used in the lesson, the students were all keen to please their teacher and were working hard on the tasks that they were set. However, it was hard to gauge progress as there was no introduction, sharing of the learning objective or indeed plenary, so for an observer it was hard to see what progress had been made. That doesn't mean the students were not making progress. It is vital that all students know the level that they are working on, and how they can improve and progress to the next level – the students in this particular class answered confidently what their levels were, but seemed to be guessing random numbers and not actually knowing what they were working at. They were keen to be seen to know what they were talking about – but in reality had very little secure knowledge of what was actual fact regarding their current stage of learning.

2.5 | Conclusion

The research found that staff who were deemed inadequate in terms of AfL had no concept that their practice included no AfL at all. For example, in a lesson which had no evidence of AfL taking place, the teacher ticked that they agreed or partly agreed with all the statements relating to their practice on the questionnaire. They also ticked all the personal and social skills because they were of the opinion that their lesson allowed pupils to develop these.

However, it is interesting to note that staff competencies in relation to AfL had a profound impact on pupil achievement, yet seemed to have no impact on pupil enjoyment at all. Both 'unsatisfactory' lessons and 'good' lessons received the same grade for enjoyment from pupils. This suggests that student enjoyment is not relative to the teacher's competency in AfL, but is far more reliant on their relationships with the teacher in question.





An investigation of the factors that influence students' decision to study languages as a GCSE option at St Mark's Academy

Joanne Isiramen and Matthew Scrimshaw

3.1 | Introduction

St Mark's Academy is currently in the process of guiding Year 9 students through their GCSE options. Following on from the Schools White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, modern foreign languages (MFL) are back on the agenda and part of the English Baccalaureate (EBACC) qualification.

Historically, not many students at St Mark's have chosen to pursue a GCSE in MFL. The Year 11 group who chose to do a GCSE in French in 2010 comprised a disappointing four students from a cohort of 128. This matches the national picture. Across England, entries in summer 2010 for GCSE German were down by 14.2 per cent, while French declined by 13.2 per cent and Spanish by 0.5 per cent.

3.2 | Research aims

This research aimed to investigate the reasons behind the low take-up of languages at St Mark's Academy and to suggest strategies that might improve language teaching in the future. In order to achieve these aims the research looked at students' perceptions of language learning in Year 9 and students' views on why they do not decide to take a language GCSE.

3.3 | Methodology

Year 9 students were asked to complete a questionnaire. There are 167 students in Year 9; however, there were a small number of student absences during the week that the questionnaire was administered and a small number of students did not complete the task properly. In total a sample of 100 completed questionnaires was achieved.

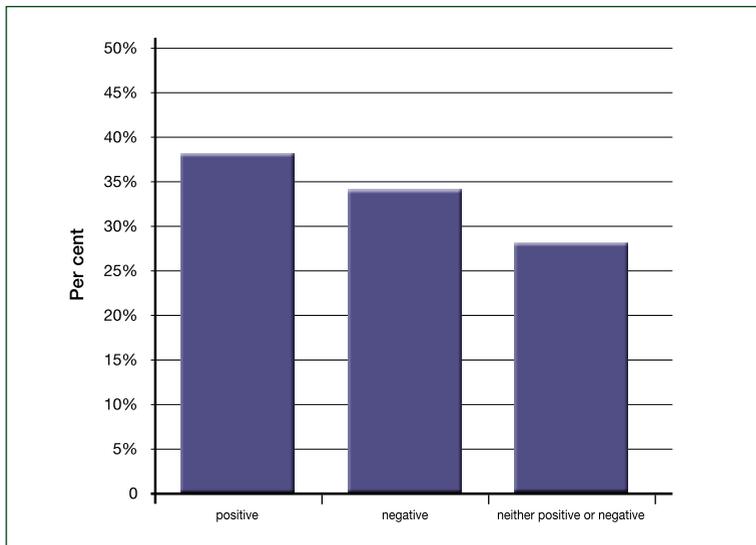
3.4 | Key findings

As can be seen from Figure 1 below, a small majority of students (38 per cent) reported that they had a positive perception of language learning. There were, however, still 34 per cent of students who had a negative perception of languages, and this is an issue that will need to be addressed.

When asked their reason for not choosing to continue with French at GCSE, 18 per cent of students responded that the main reason was because it was 'boring', 15 per cent said it was because it was 'too difficult' and 11 per cent said that they did not like their teacher. However, 64 per cent of students said that they would be more likely to study a modern language at GCSE if they were to earn an extra £5,000 per year by doing so (the additional income estimated to be earned by employees who have the ability to use a language effectively in the workplace).

Students overwhelmingly reported that the way to improve language lessons in the Academy was to make them more interesting. Forty per cent of students said that this was the most important strategy for the department, compared with 19 per cent who said that the use of group work should be increased.

Figure 1. Student attitudes towards languages



3.5 | Conclusion

Our research has shown that many students at St Mark's are in favour of language learning. They see the relevance of the subject and indeed 41 per cent said that this was the first reason that they had chosen to study French for GCSE. The research has shown that more students have had a positive than a negative experience in Year 9; this is contrary to the national picture and what we expected to find. However the students in the Academy are clear about what they want in terms of good teaching and learning. Firstly, they want to be able to visit the country of the language that they study. St Mark's was able to offer the Academy's first-ever overseas trip to Paris in March 2011; of the students from Year 9 who went on the trip (approximately 20 students) all have chosen to study French for GCSE next year.

The second thing that came out of the research was that students are saying that group work is something that they feel will help them to learn. As a school, St Mark's is increasing the amount of group work that takes place.

Finally, students have reported that they want to have choice and one of the things that they have been deprived of at St Mark's is the choice of language they can study. St Mark's will be offering a second modern foreign language from September 2012, namely Spanish. This is a language that has actually increased in popularity, when others (particularly German) have taken a real dip. We hope that from next year the department will be in an even stronger position within the school and able to give the students a real experience that will benefit them for their futures.



What makes good learning for our Year 10?

John Meinke

4.1 | Introduction

St Mark's Church of England Academy was formed from Mitcham Vale School in 2006. Mitcham Vale School had been a challenging school, with low achievement and attainment; it had been put into 'special measures' by Ofsted. The Academy had a chaotic beginning, with turbulence for both students and staff and continued low achievement and attainment; it was put into 'notice to improve' by Ofsted in 2009. There have been significant changes to the senior leadership team since 2008, which has led to a steady improvement; the Academy was removed from 'notice to improve' by Ofsted in September 2010. Indicators such as early-entry GCSE English and mathematics results suggest that the 2011 GCSE results will be the best ever for a school on the site and well above the government minimum target of 35 per cent.

The current Year 10 is a critical year group for St Mark's Academy:

- There are high expectations (both internal and external) for their achievement and attainment at Key Stage 4, including that this matches and exceeds the current Year 11, who are on track to achieve the Academy's highest-ever results.
- There are high expectations for recruitment to the Academy's developing sixth form and that students go on to be successful, independent learners during Key Stage 5.

However, this cohort also presents some challenges:

- They are perceived to be a challenging year group in terms of both behaviour and achievement.
- They are the largest cohort so far to enter Year 11 at the Academy.

4.2 | Research aims

The aim for this practitioner research project was to find out more about how Year 10 learn, including gaining a true picture of how students learn and possibly debunking some of the myths about any perceived challenges.

In order to meet this research aim, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1 What are the behaviours that are present in or absent from Year 10 lessons that prevent learning?

RQ2 What are the features of good and poor learning in Year 10?

4.3 | Methodology

Two research methods were used during the course of the project: learning walks and staff and student questionnaires.

Learning walks of Year 10 lessons

Altogether 24 lessons were visited during a period of one week in January 2011. A learning walk log was used to focus on three areas:

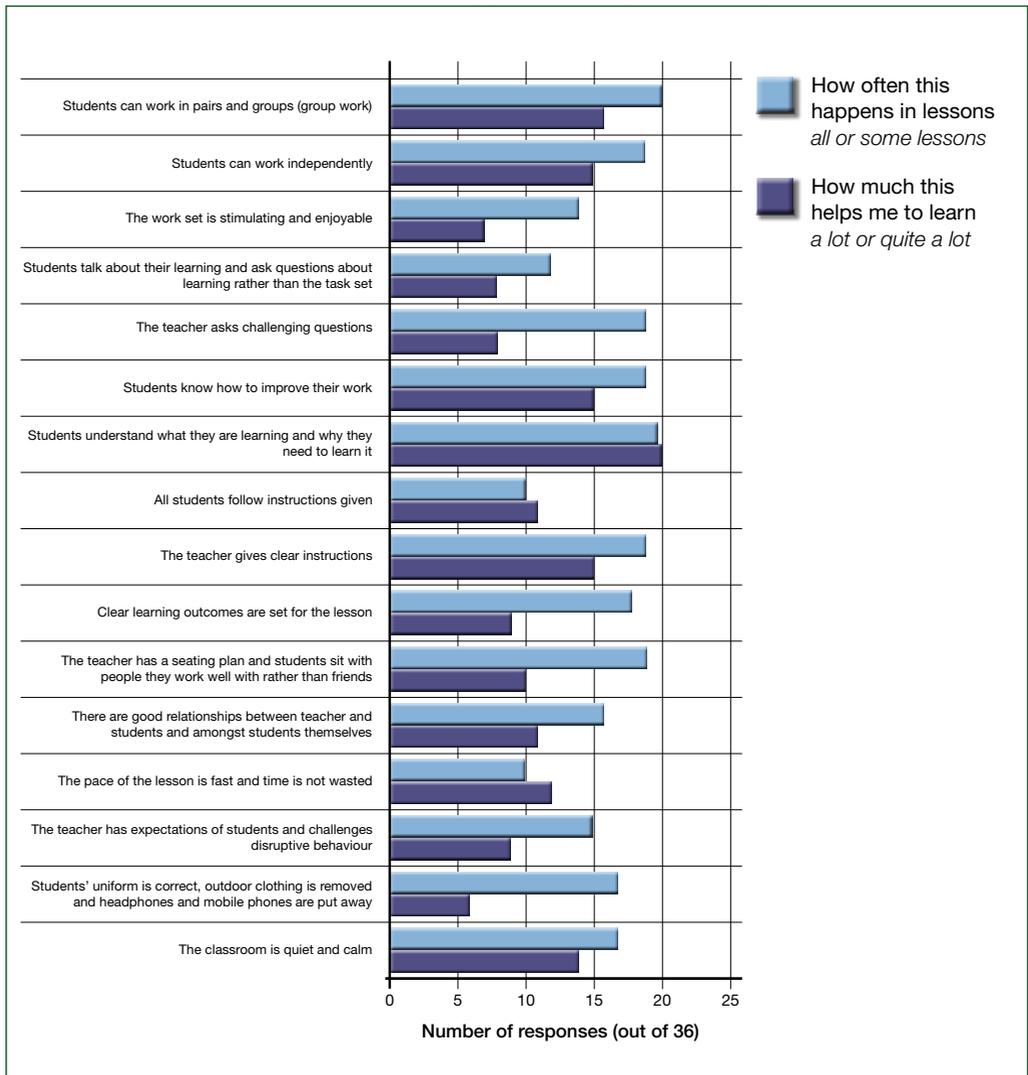
- Basic good practice
- Evidence of active learning
- Evidence of behaviour for learning

Staff and student questionnaires

Ranked questions based on the learning walk log were used to find which features of lessons most aided learning and the frequency with which they occurred during lessons. Open questions were also used to allow expansion of responses and inclusion of points missed. The questionnaire format was tweaked to make it appropriate for students and staff. Student questionnaires were given to approximately half of the cohort, with 36 completed and returned. Staff questionnaires were issued to all classroom-based staff, with 12 completed and returned.

4.4 | Key findings

Figure 2. Student responses



As can be seen from Figure 2, the results from the student questionnaire show that the conditions for successful learning are in place in the majority of lessons and that students feel that in most cases, this helps them learn.

In particular, the results indicated that students' learning is good when the following are in place:

- The 'basics': uniform is good, the classroom is calm and quiet, there are high expectations, and disruptive behaviour is challenged when it occurs.
- Lessons are well planned, with interesting activities and a good pace. Students value opportunities to be creative and to work both with each other and independently.
- Although students did not always rank highly statements such as 'the teacher has expectations of students and challenges disruptive behaviour', in their feedback students made 38 comments about poor behaviour being a barrier to learning. This would suggest that students do want to have a calm, purposeful atmosphere for learning in classrooms and for teachers and other classroom staff to have high expectations and challenge disruptive behaviour.

4.5 | Conclusion

There are some clear next steps from this research:

- To share the findings with both staff and students.
- To use the findings to establish a set of guidelines: 'What makes a good Key Stage 4 lesson'. These guidelines could help to establish a greater consistency across Key Stage 4.





Refining the casual admissions process

Emma Sadler

5.1 | Introduction

'Casual admissions' is the process by which students apply to enrol at the Academy after the school year has already commenced. St Mark's Academy receives an increasingly high number of students through casual admissions throughout the school year, which has a significant impact on lessons and levels of attainment. Many of these students are vulnerable and are often on the EAL and/or SEN register – thus it has become necessary to introduce a streamlined, clear structure to ensure that all new students are inducted into the school successfully and all teachers are appropriately informed of their needs.

The unpredictable nature of casual admissions has previously meant that students entered the school at random points throughout the year. In the last three years, the rate of casual admissions at St Mark's Academy has steadily increased – with 39 students being enrolled in 2008-2009; 55 students in 2009-2010 and a further 68 students in 2010-2011 (total number in May 2011).

Prior to restructuring the casual admissions process, new students began at the school soon after their application was received – placing immense pressure on the teaching staff and making it difficult for them to plan and prepare for new students effectively, thus decreasing the chance of integrating these students into the school successfully.

In January 2011, after extensive consultation with senior leadership and the inclusion team, St Mark's introduced a three-week cycle for casual admissions:

- Week 1** Applications processed, key information obtained from previous schools, casual admissions interviews arranged.
- Week 2** Interviews conducted, new students attend induction and assessment day, new student profiles distributed to staff, support plans created.
- Week 3** Official start date for new admissions.

This three-week cycle enabled the Academy to eliminate the random nature of new admissions and ensured that teaching staff were given adequate notice and information about new arrivals. The new process also incorporated an induction and assessment day to ensure that all new students were briefed on Academy rules and expectations prior to their first day of lessons. Assessment data obtained on this day also enabled more appropriate class allocations for the new students and ensured that relevant support packages were put in place based on students' needs and abilities.

Since January 2011, 26 students have been enrolled at the school through the new casual admissions process. Each intake has ranged from five to twelve students in Years 7–10. Analysis of key data from the 2011 casual admissions intake reveals the complex nature of these students: 54 per cent of new students were EAL (36 per cent having been in the UK for only six months or less); 15 per cent were SEN; eight per cent were classified as looked-after children and 27 per cent were eligible for free school meals. Only 12 per cent of students did not fall into any of these categories. This information further highlights the importance of carefully planning the entry and induction of new students into the Academy.

5.2 | Research aims

The research project aimed to determine the level of effectiveness of implementing a structured approach to casual admissions. In order to achieve this aim, the following research questions were explored:

- RQ1** What is the impact of having set dates for accepting casual admissions?
- RQ2** How effective is an induction day for new students in assisting with their transition into the school?
- RQ3** How effective is a structured approach to casual admissions in enabling teaching staff to cater for new students successfully in their lessons?

5.3 | Methodology

In order to address the aims of the project, the study made use of the following data:

- Analysis of key data regarding students' needs and backgrounds
- A survey of teaching staff – approximately a third of the teaching staff (20) participated in a survey. Teachers were asked to respond to a series of statements regarding the new structure of casual admissions and were also invited to share their perceptions of how the new students were integrating into the school.
- A survey of new students – 19 of the 26 students who were enrolled since January 2011 completed a survey. Students were asked to respond to a series of statements regarding their introduction to the Academy and were also invited to share their perceptions of whether they felt they were settling into the school successfully.

5.4 | Key findings

Staff survey

Casual admissions are by nature unpredictable and present teachers with an additional challenge in the classroom. Results from the staff survey indicate that the new structure has had a positive impact on the Academy:

- 95 per cent agreed that fixed casual admissions dates allowed them to plan for new arrivals more effectively
- 90 per cent felt that the new process meant that they were more aware of who the new students were
- 79 per cent felt the new process was more considerate of teachers' needs
- 95 per cent felt the new process was more considerate of students' needs.

Although teaching staff clearly felt the new structure had improved the process of admitting new students into the Academy, the research also revealed that a significant number of staff still find some aspects of casual admissions difficult to manage:

- 33 per cent stated they did not feel confident in receiving new students into their lessons
- 33 per cent disagreed that all new students had entered their lessons successfully
- 34 per cent felt they did not receive enough information regarding EAL learners.

These responses indicate that while the overall structure of the casual admissions process has become more organised and has provided more of an opportunity to plan for the arrival of new students, many staff still find it difficult to cater effectively for these students because of their complex needs. This seems to be the case particularly with regard to beginner EAL students – with one staff member commenting: *'it's difficult to plan for students if they don't speak English'*.

Student survey

The results of the student survey also revealed some mixed opinions. Firstly, student responses indicated that the new structure of the admissions process had mostly enabled them to settle into the school successfully:

- 72 per cent felt the induction day was useful and helped them to know what to expect from the school
- 79 per cent felt that they had settled well into the Academy
- 79 per cent were happy to be a student at St Mark's.

Despite these positive results, a significant number of students also indicated that they were finding it difficult to manage in their lessons – reflecting some of the concerns of the teaching staff:

- 43 per cent of students indicated they needed more support
- 53 per cent were unsure or disagreed that they had been placed in the right classes
- 63 per cent indicated they were having difficulty completing the work in their lessons.

These results confirm that while the carefully managed entry of the students has supported them in their transition to the Academy, many new students still struggle to access the curriculum because of their complex needs.

5.5 | Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the restructured casual admissions process has made a positive impact for both staff and students at St Mark's Academy; however, it has also highlighted the complex needs of the students who enter the school through this system and the further challenge that this brings to the classroom for teachers. While communication to staff about new students and the timing of their entry into lessons has improved, the next focus for the Academy will involve further development of the training and resources available to staff to support them in catering for the needs of these students more effectively – particularly beginner EAL students.







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