

Action research at St Mark's Academy 2012

Edited by Karen Whitby, Lisa Peterkin and Olivia Douse





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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

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Foreword

Dr Geraldine Hutchinson, Chair of Governors

The vision of individuals working with others and in teams as part of a 'community of practice' to improve teaching and learning at St Mark's Academy was initiated in autumn 2010. Two years on, it is with a degree of pride that we can say the improved outcomes and impact of this 'action research' is now evidenced against Ofsted criteria, and examination data shows that attainment at Key Stage 4 has now significantly increased with a sustained improving trend established. All of the teachers and support staff involved in this research have set themselves the task of creating effective and permanent social change in their classrooms. They have asked themselves the question 'How do I improve what I am doing?' They have become active participants in the changes taking place as part of the St Mark's Academy improvement strategy and are contributing their own decisions about how to make teaching and learning the best it can be.

The significant change in this second St Mark's action research publication is that the involvement of staff in middle leadership positions has greatly increased and this is both pleasing and critical to continued success. It is these middle leaders who will drive the changes and embed them in everyday practice. They also have continuous access to data as it is produced by their students and will use this as the key to sustaining school improvements and for achieving higher levels of attainment for all students. They also have great influence as leaders of their teams and within their own curriculum areas, and will ensure that 'best practice' is the expectation that all aspire to. The increasing levels of leadership devolved to this group of staff reveal that St Mark's Academy is changing and growing in maturity as an organisation, with more collaborative planning and decision-making being a feature of strategic management.

The choice of research topics reported on here is also significant, as the focus is on the reality and context of St Mark's Academy and on the real questions and issues that could be the barriers to success. Understanding and removing these barriers is the driving force behind this research and in itself it reflects individual honesty and awareness of what needs to be improved. Collaborative action research and school improvement go hand in hand: we cannot have one without the other. Now that St Mark's Academy is a professional learning community it is in a position to achieve the step-change needed: the goal is to ensure that every member of staff and every student is an active participant in the improvement journey.



Dr Geraldine Hutchinson

Chair of Governors, St Mark's Academy



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

Introduction

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 refocus on student learning and their role as facilitators of that learning. For the second year now, the practitioner research programme has been a key strand of this journey. It has provided 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 reflection 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 differentiation; use of independent learning; how to ensure good quality learning continues in a cover lesson; questioning; different models of staff training; developing a values-based system; effective transition; assessment and tracking; the role of student leadership; empowering middle leaders and developing higher-order thinking skills. 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 2011-2012. It has been a pleasure to work in collaboration with our staff and with CfBT Education Trust. Our thanks go to Geraldine Hutchinson, Chair of Governors and Karen Whitby, CfBT Research Manager who have made this possible.



Lisa Peterkin

Senior Vice Principal, St Mark's Academy



Olivia Douse

Vice Principal, St Mark's Academy



Partnership teaching as an example of differentiation for EAL learners in a mixed-ability classroom

Aneta Przygoda

1.1 | Introduction

St Mark's Academy has a diverse student population; pupils come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and speak over 50 languages. At the time of the research, a third of the pupils attending the Academy were considered to be learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL), and nearly 70 students were at an early stage of learning English. The highest population was from the Somali, Polish, Tamil and Urdu communities.

EAL learners are defined as those whose first language is, or whose life is influenced by, a language other than English. Early bilingual learners are likely to use English in the school setting and their first language at home. Due to their varying English proficiency levels, EAL students are provided with a selection of strategies to support their English language acquisition. According to their linguistic needs and abilities, the additional help varies from withdrawal groups for an intensive exposure to English to one-to-one tuition or in-class support, including partnership teaching. Amongst other forms of collaboration between teachers, partnership teaching – also known as team-teaching or co-teaching – forms an important tool that caters for the diverse needs of EAL learners. Moreover, as a mode of differentiation, partnership teaching impacts on the students in a variety of ways since it is created to influence the way the students learn and to accommodate resources to meet their needs.

1.2 | Research aims

The aim of the research was to analyse the role of partnership teaching in a classroom where different levels of linguistic ability constitute barriers to academic progress in English. In such a classroom, recognition of the needs of and differences between each individual student is a key issue for improving their linguistic development. Therefore the study also investigated whether partnership teaching is beneficial for EAL learners, and which aspects of partnership teaching are the most valuable in the mainstream English classroom.

1.3 | Methodology

To obtain the students' views on partnership teaching and how it supports attainment in the mainstream classroom, a qualitative study was conducted. Such an approach enabled exploration of existing perspectives on collaborative teaching; insight into current practice and how to improve it; and a detailed review of the impact of partnership teaching on the acquisition of knowledge in a mainstream English classroom.

The data was collected at the Academy outside the teaching periods. In order to conduct the research, a multiple-choice questionnaire was prepared. The questionnaire was designed for early EAL students and consisted of ten questions about their current routine, i.e. being taught by two teachers.

Six EAL learners, who had been taught via the partnership teaching method, were observed. They represented various language and cultural backgrounds: the group comprised two Polish speakers, two Afghani, a Spanish and a Portuguese speaker. All of them were early learners of English as an additional language. The participants were asked to answer the questions individually, with the intention that they could offer their independent point of view based on their current experience and thus an impression could be drawn from it.

1.4 | Key findings

The positive influence of collaborative teaching was reported by all the participants. They indicated that the EAL teacher is helpful in various areas of language learning. The data gathered from the questionnaires showed that the EAL learners mainly appreciate the help related to translating and explaining tasks given by the mainstream teacher. All of the respondents agreed that the additional subject teacher in the classroom offered instant help with spelling, explanation of tasks and grammar, as well as monitoring progress on a daily basis and providing constructive feedback.

According to the respondents, gap-fill tasks (for example beginnings of sentences to model answers), the use of a bilingual dictionary, and translating from the first language were the most valued methods of writing practice. This may be due to EAL students' lack of familiarity with sentence structure in English. Gap-fill exercises and translating from the learner's first language were both offered in English lessons by the EAL teacher. Working with a bilingual dictionary was reported as the least preferred option. Although a bilingual dictionary may provide an immediate help, students need better expertise in English to be able either to understand the definition of a word or choose a word suitable for a particular context.

One interesting observation was made in relation to reading practice. Respondents reported that they preferred either quiet reading or reading aloud with a group of peers. The benefits of reading, such as spelling practice or learning through error correction were acknowledged. Despite noting the teacher's expertise in modelling pronunciation while reading, not many students found the teacher helpful in practising this skill. Nevertheless, it is vital to accommodate the teacher's or a peer's assistance, to ensure some improvement is made by lower-ability readers.

In terms of the vocabulary knowledge required to complete tasks, the respondents agreed that the EAL teacher either explained tasks or vocabulary, or offered supporting materials translated into the learner's first language. Such scaffolding facilitates vocabulary practice and provides lexical reference for future lessons.

As far as the methods of differentiation are concerned, the most commonly noted were pair and group work. Peer support did not appear to be particularly popular. Comprehension checks and adapting the level of questions were highlighted as making a positive impact on students' performance in lessons. This suggests that both resources and class instructions should be adjusted to the learners' ability. In fact, accessibility of instructions and tasks affects learners' understanding of the overall lesson.

The responses to the questionnaires also revealed that the presence of an EAL teacher itself plays a significant role in the EAL students' learning. All of the respondents felt that insecurity and lack of confidence could be consequences of the absence of an EAL teacher. A lack of confidence and constraints in vocabulary knowledge are factors that prevent learners from active participation in lessons. However, it was also admitted that extra support causes embarrassment for EAL students, possibly because the additional help makes them feel vulnerable in front of the class.

1.5 | Conclusion

The research has demonstrated that partnership teaching in English lessons is valued and appreciated. It has a positive influence on EAL learners in relation to their educational and personal needs. Working in partnership mode, as demonstrated, offers benefits for these learners, especially those who find it difficult to cope with their insufficient English proficiency.

Early bilingual students need regular support to develop their second language skills and fully participate in learning activities. Difficulties that occur because of a language barrier can be overcome with assistance from an EAL teacher. Hence, partnership teaching as a way of differentiation offers methods that accelerate the progress of acquisition of the second language. The research has confirmed how advantageous such provision is for EAL learners. Apart from providing opportunities to practise the main literacy skills in the second language, the presence of the EAL teacher helps the early bilingual students gain more confidence and self-esteem.

Although partnership teaching is becoming increasingly rare in schools and is often considered to be a costly and labour-intensive method of differentiation, its benefits should not be underestimated. Based on the opinions of the participants in this study, it can be concluded that such forms of teaching are remarkably useful. Not only can collaborative teaching contribute to second language attainment, it can also positively influence students' sense of security in the classroom setting. Schools should avoid seeing partnership teaching as labour intensive and potentially costly; it is one of the better forms of differentiation in a mixed-ability classroom. The partnership teacher is able to use specialist skills and knowledge which mainstream teachers may lack, ensuring that all the teaching strategies and methods are fully focused on bringing about the maximum level of progress of early bilingual learners.



How do EAL students learn best?

Carmen Campeanu

2.1 | Introduction

The percentage of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students at St Mark's Academy is relatively high. Last year in the autumn term the percentage of EAL students was 40, and this year the current figure is 42 per cent. Over the course of the 2010-2011 academic year, 35 pupils arrived from abroad as casual admissions, of whom 27 were at an early stage of English. This year, 18 EAL pupils were admitted in the autumn term, of whom 17 were at an early stage. This suggests that the number of EAL pupils at St Mark's is increasing.

This study seeks to identify a pattern of progress for EAL students who have arrived as casual admissions from abroad and the teaching strategies that they find the most inspiring and productive. The study is presented in two parts, the first part focusing on students' progress and the second part looking at EAL students' preferences with regards to the various strategies for differentiation used in mainstream lessons.

2.2 | Research aims

The aim of this research was to raise awareness across the Academy of how EAL students make progress, as it is known that often they make progress in unexpected ways. This can be due not only to a whole set of learning attitudes formed before their arrival in this country but also to the transferable skills and knowledge that they bring with them.

Secondly, the study aimed to raise teachers' awareness of how bilingual students learn best. For this purpose, the pupils who took part in the study were asked to rate a series of statements that describe various differentiation strategies, in order for teachers to gain a better understanding of what students think works best for them.

2.3 | Methodology

The research focused on patterns of progress. This was a purely quantitative study which used raw data extracted from EAL progress monitoring tables, the main document for measuring progress in English for targeted EAL students. The process consists of measuring the progress in English language acquisition of every EAL-targeted pupil from their arrival in school until the end of the academic year. Data from 50 targeted EAL pupils was collected.

2.4 | Key findings

The results showed that the average rate of progress over one year was 4.5 sub-levels or 1.5 levels, whereas the national average for progress in English of a non-EAL learner is of 2 levels per key stage or 2 sub-levels per year.

Furthermore, if we take these findings one step further (this could be the subject of a future in-depth study) and assume that the same level of progress per year (4.5 sub-levels) is maintained over a few years, the results show that a bilingual learner who arrived as a beginner will reach a GCSE C/B grade or level 7 in four years. Previous data shows that EAL pupils without additional needs who have had extra support in school with learning English for a few years do not have difficulties achieving high GCSE grades; therefore the assumption of progress of about 4.5 sub-levels or 1.5 levels per year throughout Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 is likely to be accurate. This demonstrates the sustained intensive effort that bilingual pupils have to put into their studies to achieve good GCSE grades, and how much more difficult it is for pupils who arrive in Year 9 or Year 10 to make the required level of progress for those grades.

2.5 | Conclusion

The findings of this research are in line with the national statistics which show that EAL pupils who are well supported and challenged in school achieve exam results higher than the national average.



How can an improved homework culture across the Academy contribute to raising standards and levels of attainment?

Eva Kingcome

3.1 | Introduction

Is homework beneficial? In 1988, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) suggested all English schools should set homework, stating:

'there is enormous advantage in children spending regular periods of time... on different learning activities devised by schools, as part of a homework programme which supports the work they do in class'¹.

Yet, in 2012, the Education Secretary scrapped this 'unnecessary bureaucratic guidance' and headteachers were given autonomy to set the homework policy for their schools.

Homework has always been an integral part of schooling. Proponents argue its beneficial effects such as fostering independent learning, developing 'responsible character traits'²; opponents claim it can disenfranchise. Research indicates that a correlation between homework and academic achievement is still tenuous but there exists a link between homework and positive attitudes towards school³.

Since its inception as a 'fast-track' Academy in 2006, St Mark's has faced a catalogue of challenging contextual and cultural circumstances: three headteachers in four years; a diluted senior team; high staff turnover; but above all, poor results, significantly below the National Challenge benchmark. The Academy serves a community within inner London that experiences significant socio-economic deprivation; 30 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, twice the national average, and 33 per cent of pupils have learning difficulties, against a national average of 20 per cent.

In 2011, student attainment rose to 43 per cent A*-C, including English and Maths, an increase of 20 per cent on 2010, exceeding the Government's floor target for the first time. The findings of a monitoring visit by Her Majesty's Inspectors, on 7 March 2012, stated 'the Academy has made good progress in making improvements' but needs to 'improve the quality of teaching and learning to accelerate students' progress and to raise standards'.

¹ Cited in Sharp, C. (2002) 'Should schools set homework?' *PRE*, Issue 27, 2002 <http://www.pre-online.co.uk> (accessed February 2012)

² Cooper, H. (2008) 'Does homework improve academic achievement?' *SEDI*, Letter Vol. XX, No. 2, August 2008 <http://www.sedi.org/pubs> (accessed April 2012)

³ Keys, W. and Fernandes, C. (1993) cited in S. Hallam 'Pupils' perspectives on homework' *The Guardian*, 9 February 2004 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Education> (accessed March 2012)

3.2 | Research aims

This research sought to explore the homework 'culture' within the Academy; to examine key factors which condition this culture; and to offer some recommendations to improve the Academy's homework ethos for all stakeholders, with a view to supporting the raising of standards and attainment across St Mark's.

3.3 | Methodology

As an empirical enquiry, the starting point for the study was the collection of data, by asking questions, observing actions and extracting evidence from documents. The methodology was practitioner action research, using mixed methods to capture both qualitative and quantitative data.

The main method used was questionnaires: structured for students, semi-structured for staff. Both questionnaires contained open and closed questions. The questionnaire was completed by one member from each department, including the headteacher, and 22 students ranging from Year 7 to Year 11.

3.4 | Key findings

Staff

Staff definition of homework was broadly in line with much of the literature on homework – to foster independent learning and consolidate key skills; 90 per cent maintained homework should be set, particularly core subject teachers, although 10 per cent felt it was 'setting the students up to fail' as many did not have the tools or home environment to complete their homework. This 10 per cent came from 'non-core' subjects such as art, drama, PE and music. All respondents concurred that the homework ethos at the Academy was poor.

Staff were aware of a whole-school homework policy, yet views were mixed regarding advantages and disadvantages of homework. Homework was seen as:

- habit forming
- an opportunity for students to challenge themselves
- promoting motivation and self-discipline
- alienating and disenfranchising students
- time-consuming for students
- frequently poorly completed.

Asked how homework was assessed, 10 per cent of teachers admitted that the homework that they set was not marked; 20 per cent reported that it was marked by student peers; and 30 per cent responded that it was marked 'intermittently'. Core subjects and French were always marked regularly.

Teachers identified a juxtaposition between parental demand and poor parental involvement. It was reported that homework planners were seldom used as students did not bring them, did not record homework in them and parents seldom signed them. All staff said chasing up homework was very time-consuming, often fruitless, exacerbated by poor parental response or support.

Students

The majority of students (59 per cent) maintained homework should be set, but agreed that it was not always completed. Pupils recognised the main purpose of homework was to reinforce classroom learning, to promote independent learning and 'get a good education'. Pupils felt homework should be linked to classroom activities, should be varied, not too long; they should understand it and rewards for homework should be appropriate. Opponents were clear: their main complaints concerned tasks that made little contribution to learning, or were boring, long and tedious; homework was not a priority in their busy lives. Consequences were minimal; homework was often marked late, with little pupil-teacher interaction and poor feedback to improve; some students completed homework for some teachers and not for others.

Parental involvement was a contentious area. The type of help was a crucial factor: support was either encouraging, pressured or stressful, causing arguments at home. Students openly admitted they would not tell parents about homework, or even lie about it; this was compounded by no written corroboration in planners. Planners were under-utilised, regularly lost or left behind – 32 per cent had nothing recorded in them; only 18 per cent were regularly signed by parents.

3.5 | Conclusion

Though this project only scratched the surface, it suggests that both teachers and students at St Mark's consider homework to be important to learning. Evidence suggests the impact of homework on achievement is mixed, yet students who complete homework often perform better. Homework can develop pupils' work ethic, study skills and attitudes to school, which in turn can lead to improved standards. Homework needs to come to the forefront of the Academy's agenda as a valuable vehicle to support 'raising standards and levels of attainment'.

Homework needs to be aligned with the Academy's focus on 'enjoyment, engagement and challenge'. It should be meaningful and purposeful to students, staff and learning. It must be manageable, challenging and stimulating but not too difficult, thereby encouraging self-confidence and understanding. Above all, it should enable initiative and creativity.



To what extent is student leadership being developed across St Mark's Academy?

Matthew Scrimshaw

4.1 | Introduction

Student leadership encompasses many activities within a school. Leadership skills may be enhanced by participation in activities such as:

- student representative councils
- house councils
- team sports
- peer support
- peer mediation.

The current trend is to encourage students to be more than just involved but rather to lead and make decisions about everyday events in the life of the school. This will not only benefit those involved in the various groups but will also make the whole school better for the students who attend.

The student body at St Mark's has a lot of energy and spirit. They want to be involved in the life of the school above and beyond coming to lessons and spending time with friends at breaks and lunchtimes. Previously, however, the offer to students did not give them a role and/or responsibilities in the school. In the past 18 months things have changed dramatically and the students are now involved in every part of the life of the Academy, for example via:

- enrichment classes held every day after school, where students are encouraged to take part in a huge range of activities led by staff, outside specialists or the students themselves
- coaching time structured with a weekly theme and activities which the pupils themselves can be involved in
- becoming 'Sing-up' singing leaders (a project for students to learn how to be singing leaders and working with primary schools)
- becoming sports leadership ambassadors (students who participate in decisions such as: designing a new PE kit, deciding which sports are taught at St Mark's and how, the organisation of sports day, helping develop team-building activities and togetherness as a community)
- the College Council (a group of Key Stage 5 students – similar to the School Council, it is a forum in which students can discuss and suggest ways forward for the sixth form).

This study explored the importance of student leadership; analysed the impact that student leadership has on teaching and learning; and investigated how student leadership can be further developed at St Mark's Academy.

4.2 | Research aims

Student leadership is a very broad area, so in order to create a manageable project, this research focused on student leadership in lessons. The main aim for the project was to find out how much evidence there is of student-led learning in lessons.

4.3 | Methodology

A 'learning walk' proforma was created comprising 16 statements about student-led learning. As a second research instrument, a meeting of the School Council was filmed and analysed for information about how students view the school.

4.4 | Key findings

The results of the study indicate that all departments at St Mark's are resounding in their agreement that student-led learning is well developed at the Academy. The learning walks revealed a high level of student engagement and enjoyment in lessons and a good level of evidence of students working independently to demonstrate analysis and evaluation. In all of the lessons that were observed, there was evidence that students show understanding of what they are learning and why it is important. However, there was less evidence of students asking questions about their learning (not the task itself) and there was also limited evidence that students know how to improve and move forward.

4.5 | Conclusion

This research has shown a strong amount of evidence of student-led learning in lessons at St Mark's Academy. However, the research has also raised the following issues that could be addressed in future:

- Students do not routinely ask questions about their learning, but are still in the habit of asking questions about the short-term or long-term task that they are working on. St Mark's needs to develop this thinking in students and make this part of their everyday language.
- Whilst the research project generated a lot of data, there was insufficient time for the participants to discuss the results and plan changes.
- Students did not get the chance to participate in the data analysis. The research could be further enhanced by asking for their feedback.



What factors influence the delivery of a good cover lesson?

Karen Taylor

5.1 | Introduction

Cover teachers and cover supervisors are used to fill positions that have become available for several reasons; for example staff may have left, taken maternity leave or are on sick leave. Currently there are five posts at St Mark's Academy filled by cover staff: one vacancy, two maternity cover and two illnesses. St Mark's has one full-time cover supervisor, whose role involves covering teacher absence, and a part-time cover supervisor whose role includes managing day-to-day cover.

Short-term cover for teacher absence due to sickness, continuing professional development activities, school trips, or medical appointments are filled by either external cover supply staff, or internally by cover supervisors and teaching staff.

'Rarely cover'⁴ is always considered when organising cover. This means that permanent teachers are not usually requested to cover a lesson more than once a week. PPA time⁵ is also avoided when organising cover. In the event of covering for an absent teacher, Key Stage 3 and 4 lessons are covered; however, Key Stage 5 students study independently.

5.2 | Research aims

The aim of this research project was to establish whether the *preparation* of a good cover lesson at St Mark's Academy impacts on the *delivery* of a good cover lesson.

⁴ The National Agreement: Raising Standards and Tackling Workload, introduced from September 2004, placed a 38-hour annual limit on the amount of cover that teachers could undertake. From 1 September 2009 there was no longer an annual limit, and teachers should only 'rarely cover' for absent colleagues.

⁵ The Workload Agreement guarantees teachers in maintained schools in England and Wales ten per cent of their timetabled teaching to be set aside as preparation, planning and assessment (PPA) time during the school day.

5.3 | Methodology

The methodology applied to this project was practitioner action research. Several methods were used to capture information including student questionnaires, staff questionnaires and discussions with staff. In order to meet the aims of this research project, the features of a good cover lesson were identified and applied to a ranked research questionnaire.

The features of a good cover lesson were identified as:

- the cover teacher/supervisor is recognised as a non-specialist subject teacher
- teacher notes/lesson plan are available
- resources and their location are available
- there is a buddy system within teaching teams
- extension work is identified
- differentiation is incorporated
- seating plans are available
- suggested strategies for behaviour are available
- answers to work are provided
- feedback from cover staff is acted upon.

5.4 | Key findings

Sixteen questionnaires were completed by school staff (less than a third of the teaching staff) and 30 Year 8 students completed a student questionnaire. In addition, five Year 11 students were asked a series of open questions in order to gain an insight into their perception of cover.

The questionnaire responses show that over 80 per cent of teachers surveyed and 60 per cent of students surveyed agreed that cover resources were made available. When teachers and students were asked to reflect on how a cover experience could be made better, both students and teachers commented on improving the resources. Comments received stated that the following are needed:

'Clearly signalled work; resources; paper or exercise books; sufficient work for the hour'

'To have the cover work ready for the teacher... [so they do not need to] go looking for the work or extra work when the students finish early'

'Equipment working to full capacity'

'Enough text books for students to access the lesson'.

This suggests that the cover work is of a good standard, although in some areas the required resources are sometimes lacking.

Students and teaching staff also shared opinions about behaviour. 60 per cent of teachers and 50 per cent of students agreed that discipline issues were followed up. When suggesting how the cover experience could be improved, responses included:

'Availability of resources, support with challenging students'

'Departmental support in enforcing discipline issues'

'All students behaving in a respectful, honest and helpful way'

'If everyone acts normal and [does] not mess around'

'The class is not allowed to muck about and does the work at hand'.

The comments may suggest that poor student behaviour impacts on all elements of a cover lesson. This is frustrating for both students and staff.

When analysing students' perception of what a better experience of a cover lesson was, it was interesting to read the following comments:

'Games with the work or a competition'

'If we could have fun activities and try to keep out of trouble and if we could continue our work'

'Make them more fun'.

Similarly a member of the teaching staff commented that a cover lesson would be a good experience if:

'The work is such that students could complete it and even better if they enjoy doing it'.

It is interesting to note that the questionnaire does not talk about the lessons being 'fun' or 'enjoyable', for example by the use of games or a competition. However, this was identified by both students and teachers.

5.5 | Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to establish whether the preparation of a good cover lesson at St Mark's Academy impacts on the delivery of a good cover lesson.

It can be argued that the success of a cover lesson does not solely depend on the quality of the preparation. Other factors such as resources, students' behaviour and an element of fun can influence the delivery of a good cover lesson.

The next steps would be to share the results of these findings with staff, and to use the findings to set out guidelines as to what could be included in a cover lesson; as well as to investigate further the factors that can influence cover lessons.



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DRINK SMOOTH WITH CUPS

The development of higher-order thinking skills in Year 8 technology lessons

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6.1 | Introduction

The last full Ofsted report (September 2010) for St Mark's Academy highlighted that pupils' learning was being limited by a lack of probing questions by teachers, preventing their progress in lessons. As a result of this judgement, strategies were implemented to encourage the development of higher-order thinking skills in order to improve teaching and learning and to promote pupil progress.

Higher-order thinking skills include decisive, rational, pensive, metacognitive, and creative thinking. These are activated when pupils encounter unfamiliar problems, doubts, questions or dilemmas.

Previously, the structure of conventional teaching and learning in design technology lessons had encouraged students to give right or wrong answers and provided little opportunity for them to express themselves to teachers or peers. This research was designed with the aim of researching the different ways a teacher can implement strategies to encourage higher-order thinking skills in lessons. It is hoped that developing higher-order thinking skills in design technology lessons will stimulate effective learning and more fulfilling lessons, which hopefully will result in progress for both teacher and pupils.

6.2 | Research aims

The aim of this research was to evaluate the effect of higher-order thinking skills on pupil progress. The research questions that this study sought to answer were:

- RQ1** Can higher-order thinking skills improve academic success?
- RQ2** What are the most effective strategies used to develop higher-order thinking skills in technology lessons?

6.3 | Methodology

Taking into consideration validity and reliability in collating data, semi-structured interviews were undertaken to clarify any misunderstanding of observations. Pupils were put into groups to solve problems whilst their interactions and level of thinking were observed and recorded. Only pupils with below-average National Curriculum levels were observed and interviewed, as the aim of the research was for them to develop higher-order thinking skills and possibly to increase their attainment levels. Over a ten-week period, the sessions were carried out for 30 minutes on Wednesdays, on weeks 2, 4, 8 and 10. Notes were taken on the pupils' willingness to complete a task, the amount and level of questions they asked, how they justified alternative solutions and how they built knowledge with other group members. Guided questions were used to aid with the observation, for example:

1. Is the pupil on task?
2. Has the pupil produced an alternative solution?
3. Has the pupil asked intriguing questions?

Studies have shown that semi-structured qualitative interviews have the advantages of 'adaptability', since they enable the interviewer to 'follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings'⁶. This allowed some in-depth discussion during the interview, whilst still adhering to a structured procedure. In total, four pupils were chosen to participate in the semi-structured interviews. These took place in weeks 1 and 10 to elicit what participants understood about thinking levels, and in weeks 5 and 8 to clarify observation queries and to obtain pupils' feedback on their concerns and progress with strategies used in lessons. The interview began with simple, open-ended questions related to their thinking experience, which gave the opportunity to gain factual information. 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 answers⁷.

6.4 | Key findings

Student interview

The results from the interviews illustrate that all the participants have been asked to 'think' by a teacher or an adult at some point throughout their schooling. However, only one fully understood what thinking involves or how to think. In response to being asked to think, the participants either stopped answering questions or did not respond to the teacher. One participant reported that they felt demotivated and 'stupid'. One pupil suggested that thinking meant looking at different people's views. Other pupils said that it meant figuring out problems, considering other answers and getting the correct answer. All of the pupils said group work and problem-solving strategies helped them to understand more and encouraged them to think. They also said that thinking helped them to learn better since they understood what was expected of them or what the tasks required of them. Two pupils stated that asking questions, even though they did not like to be put on the spot, helped them to learn better and enabled them to teach their peers about something they clearly understood. None of the participants knew what higher-order thinking was, or had heard of it before the study group.

⁶ Bell, J. (2005) *Doing your research project: a guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social science*. London: Open University Press.

⁷ Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K.R.B. (2000) *Research methods in education* (fifth edition). London: Routledge Falmer.

The main theme that emerged was that pupils should be informed about the different levels of thinking and be asked specific probing questions to develop that, instead of being told to 'think'. The other theme is that pupils must be given opportunities to relay knowledge to other pupils, which will develop their thinking.

Teacher observation

An assessment tool was used to determine whether pupils' levels of thinking increased when a variety of teaching and learning strategies was used in the classroom. The overall results revealed an increase in pupils' levels of thinking.

The findings suggest that teachers need to ask the pupils questions in order to engage them and zone in on their levels of understanding. Pupils who underachieved in lessons could improve if information was taught using a variety of strategies that suited their needs, since different learning and thinking styles may affect how pupils progress. Pupils' likes and dislikes and comprehension levels also affect thinking skills. They should, if possible, contribute to the planning process so that more interest is shown in the content. Also, pupils need more practice or models of how to justify their answers. High expectations, motivation and encouragement help pupils to achieve.

6.5 | Conclusion

The evidence collected from this project revealed that significant educational gains are possible from teaching thinking skills. In several instances pupils who would not normally participate in an activity enjoyed leading, produced alternative solutions and asked intriguing questions. In this research, levels of thinking increased when pupils were partaking in learning strategies such as problem-solving, collaboration and questioning. It was mentioned that thinking skills gave a better chance of achieving higher grades as the result of more detailed and justified answers. Adey and Shayer (1994) confirm this point: in their study pupils who were taught thinking skills strategies gained higher GCSE passes not only in the subject taught but also in other areas of the curriculum⁸. Thinking skills activities can increase pupil success; however, as pointed out in this study there are other fundamental factors that affect pupils' thinking. According to Watkins (2005) in order for effective learning to occur, teachers must create a child-centred environment where pupils can feel at ease to learn⁹.

⁸ Adey, P. and Shayer M. (1994) *Really raising standards*. London: Routledge.

⁹ Watkins, C. (2005) *Classrooms as learning communities. What's in it for schools?* London: Routledge.



The results from the data suggest that using a wide variety of carefully selected and implemented strategies develops pupils' thinking skills. Lessons should be multifaceted where scenes change frequently, thus implying a wide variety of activities in one lesson to cater for multiple learning styles. As one pupil said in an interview session, *'It is good to use all these strategies, but using the same one all the time does get boring and then you start to lose interest.'* The study revealed that questioning, collaboration and problem-solving strategies were identified by the pupils as activities that helped them to think better.

Questioning is another strategy that was proven to be successful in developing pupils' thinking skills levels. Although pupils often do not like to be asked probing questions, the study revealed that they learn better from this strategy as it helps them to consider other options and challenge their own answers; engaging in this process automatically improves their thinking ability. Another helpful strategy that was highlighted in this study is the use of practical activities to enhance thinking. In addition, pupils tend to remember more about a lesson that took place out of the conventional learning context.

The research set out to analyse the development of pupils' levels of thinking during the use of a variety of teaching strategies. In conclusion, higher-order thinking does not fully explain the levels of pupils' achievement. It does, however, seem valuable as a theoretical tool that can help people to think differently about how they view and interact with their learning. Provided higher-order thinking is developed appropriately, it could be a useful tool to aid success in learning. In order to develop effective higher-order thinking skills in pupils, a multi-method approach must be used. It is therefore recommended that pupils be educated about higher-order thinking skills which can sustain and increase meta-cognitive development.

Pupils should also be taught ground rules for exploratory group-work practice and encouraged to reflect regularly on their thinking. Teachers need training in managing group activity, including setting challenging tasks and developing flexible discourse strategies. Purposeful thinking skills strategies should be embedded in the curriculum, not fragmented into discrete 'thinking skills' sessions, thus enabling transference of skills. It is recommended that pupils should lead the learning in a lesson whenever possible in order to build their confidence in controlling their own learning.



Lesson study

Lucy Brown, Debbie Purdon and Hannah Fahey

7.1 | Introduction

This research aimed to help develop learning strategies to motivate Year 9 students in humanities, English and creative arts lessons. In order to develop these strategies, a 'lesson study' approach was used. Lesson study is a teaching improvement process that has its origins in Japanese elementary education, where it is a widespread professional development practice. Working in a small group, teachers collaborate with one another, meeting to discuss learning goals and to plan an actual classroom lesson (called a 'research lesson'); they then observe how it works in practice, and meet to reflect and report on the results so that other teachers can benefit from it. Three collaborative planning sessions and three joint observations were conducted, one in English, one in religious studies and one in drama, to plan and reflect upon the learning of eight pupils across these subjects.

7.2 | Research aims

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

7.3 | Methodology

Evidence for this piece of practitioner research was gathered through a range of data collection methods. After each collaborative planning session, one practitioner would teach the lesson, while the other two observed pupil behaviour and learning. Eight pupils were used as a sample, which meant that the observers could focus on four pupils each during an observation. Written notes were taken recording pupil engagement, learning and contribution during different learning activities.

Teacher reflections were shared through a post-lesson oral debrief that took place within 24 hours of the lesson. These reflections were then typed onto a blog and made available for participants to see. Pupils were also asked to keep a blog in response to four open questions, recording their reflections on the lesson. Teachers had access to this blog.

7.4 | Key findings

It was found that planning together provided an opportunity to share ideas, take new risks and build up a greater 'pool' of learning strategies to enhance the learning of all pupils.

For the teachers, being able to plan collaboratively with colleagues who have a similar vision for teaching and learning has proven invaluable. By encouraging colleagues to co-plan lessons and observe pupil behaviour/learning, risk taking within the classroom can take place with minimum risk. If things go wrong, it does not matter because colleagues have planned the lesson together.

Colleagues' monitoring of the learning of specific pupils improved their understanding of individual needs. Asking pupils to keep a blog of each lesson and explain where they thought they learnt best also aided this crucial understanding and allowed relationships to develop and grow. Pupils felt valued that their teachers want to involve them in the planning, monitoring and review of their learning and as a result motivation and engagement increased.

7.5 | Conclusion

As a teacher it is important to remember that you, as well as your pupils, are constantly learning. This study is an example of a 'learning community' where educators and students were asked to reflect on their practice. It is a prime example of a small piece of research that has enhanced practice, relationships and motivation; all participants would recommend that other schools develop this collaborative approach to school improvement of teaching and learning. Importantly, however, teachers will need time to plan and reflect together if similar studies are to be as successful in the future.



Questioning at St Mark's Academy

Daniel Stevenson

8.1 | Introduction

In September 2010, when the last Ofsted inspection took place at St Mark's, inspectors suggested that teachers should more regularly ask probing questions which give students opportunities to develop and explain their ideas fully, especially the more able students. Although questioning has since improved, it was still felt that teachers at the Academy needed to ask more 'higher-order' questions to accelerate pupils' progress.

At present, the preferred model of questioning that seems to be used most is that described by Benjamin Bloom in his *Taxonomy of educational objectives*¹⁰. This method is clearly encouraged at St Mark's as it is present on the whole-school lesson plan proforma, where teachers are encouraged to plan questions that meet the requirements of Bloom's hierarchy of levels, to challenge and engage students at the relevant cognitive level.

8.2 | Research aims

Two key research questions were addressed by this study:

- RQ1 What is the 'student experience' of questioning at St Mark's Academy?
- RQ2 How can pupil voice improve the practice of questioning, to have a greater impact on learning?

8.3 | Methodology

To discover the student experience of questioning within lessons, three coaching groups acted as a sample of the whole school and completed a questionnaire, while a further coaching group took part in a focus group questioning session. It should be noted that the perspective of Year 10 students is missing from this research as these students were absent from school at the time on work experience.

¹⁰ Bloom, B.S., Engelhart, M.D., Furst, E.J., Hill, W.H., and Krathwohl, D.R. (1956) *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals. Handbook 1: Cognitive domain*. New York: Longmans Green.

8.4 | Key findings

The student survey revealed that students recognise the importance of being asked questions to assist them in making progress; they see questions as valuable to their comprehension of skills, concepts and how to complete tasks to acquire these.

The student focus group revealed that students feel that questions are important because *'they address something that you don't understand'*. However, students also reported that sometimes they do not receive detailed enough answers to questions, which means that gaps in understanding are not addressed. Students appreciated it when teachers used questioning to check understanding before tasks were started, and when questions were used to enable them to gain an understanding of the learning, not just an understanding of the task that needs to be completed.

Maths and science lessons were highlighted as subjects where questioning is used successfully as a tool to break down larger problems into simpler and more understandable chunks of information. In the social sciences, questioning was used to engage students by eliciting their views regarding statements about the learning. Another method of effective questioning highlighted by students was when pupils were given think time or the chance to write answers to questions before sharing those answers with the class. Answers to questions were seen as being least effective when teachers did not take the time to fully comprehend the questions that students were asking them.

Sometimes students felt that not enough time in lessons was put aside to allow them to ask their teacher and each other questions about the learning so that they could make improved progress.

8.5 | Conclusion

If Bloom's Taxonomy is the Academy's preferred method of asking students levelled and higher-order questions, then it needs to be considered how to enable students to use this model to ask each other questions which bring about progress.

One method to achieve this could be to share with students 'question stems', linked to Bloom's, and ask them to formulate questions that could be posed to their peers to secure progress linked to learning objectives. A starting point could see gifted and talented students using the stems to formulate their own questions which could in turn be used to develop opportunities for peer assessment. This 'student-led' approach would allow teachers to trial a method whereby students form and pose questions before developing this at a whole-class level.



The transition to secondary school: ensuring high standards of student behaviour in Year 7 are sustained

Sarri Grey

9.1 | Introduction

The journey from Year 6 to Year 7 can be quite daunting and a significant change for some students. Providing information, advice and guidance for students and parents before they start at St Mark's Academy is a crucial part of our expectations and values. Promoting good behaviour throughout the school needs to start from Year 7 and be maintained right through to Year 11. Creating enthusiasm and excitement to keep students constantly interested and motivated is a difficult task that requires continuous thought and meticulous planning.

St Mark's uses a web-based incident reporting and tracking system to monitor behaviour. The findings in this report are based solely on the information extracted from this system (henceforth referred to as the System). It could possibly be argued that this report is not a true account of Year 7 behaviour because not all staff make adequate use of the System. However, the System information correlates with staff's own knowledge about the students who are causing most concern and the students who are well behaved. It could therefore, equally be argued that overall this report is a fair representation of Year 7 behaviour. It is hoped that this report will inspire further investigation and inform future behavioural policy and practices at St Mark's.

9.2 | Research aims

This research aimed to provide a general understanding of Year 7 behaviour within St Mark's Academy and to look at possible ways in which good behaviour can be sustained.

9.3 | Methodology

The study looked at behaviour from the beginning of the academic year (5 September 2011) until the Easter break (30 March 2012). The research involved comparing student opinions with that of the System website information and seeing how the information correlated. The data was obtained by conducting a self-selected survey with 60 Year 7 students who had previously come from a variety of local community primary schools. They were asked to complete a few statements to provide an insight into Year 7 behaviour, such as the level of influence of other year groups and the impact of the Academy's reward system on their behaviour.

9.4 | Key findings

The following paragraph presents the results from the questionnaire. This is then cross-referenced against the System data.

The students were asked whether they were 'influenced by the negative behaviour of other year groups within the school'. The majority of students were not sure how they were influenced; those who said that they were influenced felt that they were influenced by Years 8 and 9.

The System data shows that Years 7, 8 and 9 share an equal amount of overall incidents. This would suggest that both positive and negative points are given out more to these year groups than to Years 10 and 11. Year 7 negative incidents are slightly fewer than in Years 8 and 9. This indicates that the negative behaviour of Year 7 is likely to increase as these students go up in year group.

There is an equal balance of positive incidents (rewards) recorded between Years 7, 8 and 9 year groups. However, this appears to reduce as they go into Years 10 and 11. Data from the questionnaire revealed that 38 students 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement that being given rewards helps them to behave.

The System data shows that the total number of Year 7 incidents has declined over time; at the start of the academic year there were around 800 total incidents recorded. This reduced to approximately 370 by the end of March. In September 700 rewards were given to Year 7 students; by March only around 300 were given.

9.5 | Conclusion

Years 8 and 9 students clearly have more negative incidents than the Year 7s. This could impact on Year 7 behaviour, causing them to follow suit. Although Year 7s are not sure if their behaviour is influenced by other year groups, the System data suggests that the negative behaviour of Year 7s is likely to increase as they go up in year group. The large number of students choosing 'not sure' could be explained by the lack of self-awareness of the year group.

The total number of rewards given to students at the beginning of the year is higher than that by the end of term 2. The majority of Year 7 students (38) believe that 'rewards help them to behave'. However, it is clear from the System data that Year 7 students are given fewer rewards throughout the academic year. This could explain why Year 7 incidents increase throughout the academic year. It is possible that rewards are not given out as frequently so students behave worse. However, teachers may suggest that the Year 7 behaviour worsens and this is the reason for the giving out fewer rewards.

Primary schools tend to focus very much on rewards (stickers, charts and prizes) to encourage good behaviour. Many of the Year 7 students stated in the questionnaire that they felt rewards made them enjoy lessons more and want to do well. At the secondary phase it is possible that this emphasis on rewards is not continued and as a result the Year 7 students misbehave. The Academy may want to consider whether the reward system is effective in promoting positive behaviour and what changes could be implemented for the future.



How can middle leaders contribute to effective leadership?

Claudette Bailey-Morrissey

10.1 | Introduction

St Mark's Academy is committed to quality assurance and, as part of that process, all aspects of the Academy underwent a critical examination of quality in an attempt to disseminate best practice. This research project was an investigation into the insights and perceptions of the quality of middle leadership through the eyes of five heads of department.

10.2 | Research aims

The research aimed to investigate the perceptions and leadership experiences of five heads of department at St Mark's, so as to understand the phenomenon of middle leadership through the eyes of middle leaders, thereby revealing how they perceive their roles in contributing to improving standards in leadership and management and overall Academy effectiveness. In order to achieve this, participants were invited to share their opinions and experiences of middle leadership so as to explore their perceptions of how leadership can improve teaching and learning and contribute to overall school improvement.

Whilst the link between school effectiveness and school improvement is a contested one¹¹, Hargreaves¹² argues that school improvement is concerned with enhancing and realising the organisation's capacity to achieve its goals and to promote teacher effectiveness at classroom level; and school effectiveness is concerned with the organisation's structures and culture and how these are expressed in its policies and practices – specifically how they relate to and promote the overall goals of the school. Governments are investing substantial sums in leadership development because they believe that this will produce better leaders and more effective school systems¹³. It is hoped that this research will contribute to raising awareness of the role of middle leaders as central to school success and student outcomes.

¹¹ Wrigley, T. (2003) *School of hope: a new agenda for school improvement*. Staffs: Trentham Books

¹² Hargreaves, A. (2001) *Learning to change: teaching beyond subjects and standards*. California: Jossey-Bass Inc.

¹³ Bultinck, H.J. and Bush, L.H. (2009) *99 ways to lead and succeed: strategies and stories for school leaders*. New York: Eye on Education Inc.

10.3 | Methodology

In order to gain a clear understanding of the perceptions and leadership experiences of five heads of department at St Mark's, a practitioner action research methodology was adopted. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used throughout this research study as a starting point for gathering data in order to answer the research question. The choice of research methods was largely determined by the research question and by the aim to triangulate the research process by strengthening the findings gained from both approaches.

The research methods that were used as part of this research study included a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, which were video-recorded. The questionnaire comprised five questions, with seven to ten sub-statements where participants were asked to identify their position or opinion based on a five-point scale, ranging from Very important, Fairly important, Not sure, and Not very important, to Not at all important; and from Strongly agree, Agree, Not sure, and Disagree, to Strongly disagree. The participants were asked to comment on their confidence and understanding of their roles as middle leaders. Additionally, statements exploring their motivations, sense of job satisfaction, capability and leadership practices were investigated along with their perceptions of areas of the role that they considered to be demotivating – including the increasing expectation of fulfilling administrative tasks and keeping up to date with subject and government initiatives as well as driving up standards in teaching and learning, and managing staff. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the other data collection method. This research method was selected because it lends itself to a more exploratory analysis.

10.4 | Key findings

The outcomes of the research demonstrated that heads of department are committed to their roles and achieve a sense of personal achievement and satisfaction from their roles. Heads of departments' responses varied regarding perceptions of the preparation for middle leadership. One head of department felt that they had been unprepared for fully carrying out all the duties that are required of the role. Four heads of department stated that they were confident in the knowledge that they were able to run their departments as they chose and enjoyed a high level of autonomy that derived from this. All five heads of department identified managing staff as a motivating factor along with the feeling that they had a significant role to play in contributing towards improving the social culture of the Academy. When asked about team work, four out of the five felt motivated by building a set of shared values, a sense of team work and the collegiality gained from working closely with members of their teams.

Overwhelmingly, all heads of department identified a student-centred approach as being central to the success of any department or school. One head of department emphasised the importance of involving students in every step of the learning process; and all felt that teaching and learning was where they could make the most significant contribution to the overall effectiveness of the Academy, by ensuring that high standards were set and that all staff were delivering 'good' or 'outstanding' lessons. Two heads of department identified that in order to ensure 'good' and 'outstanding' lessons it was essential to lead by example and all stated that having a consistent approach would lead to high standards, high expectations of students and staff, and an outstanding Academy.

All heads of department saw leadership as critical to establishing a successful school. They felt that their roles would involve: leading teams of people in achieving successful student outcomes through the use of assessment data and tracking; adopting a consistent approach to behaviour management; and involving members of their teams in sharing good practice. A significant factor that emerged from three of the interviews was the sense that leadership was about having a vision and also about risk-taking. These heads of department saw having a vision and the importance of sharing that vision with others as a leadership quality that they felt they had. It was also interesting to learn that they identified the importance of the link between having a vision and inspiring their staff to share it. In addition, these heads of department felt that it was essential to enable their staff – so that they were willing to take risks without the fear of failure. They recognised the importance of their leadership skills and practices in moving their departments forward, and making a significant contribution to moving the Academy forward.

10.5 | Conclusion

This research study was conducted as part of the quality assurance process at the Academy. The study has shown that heads of department at St Mark's are aware that they have a central role to play as middle leaders in improving standards of leadership and management of the Academy and in achieving school effectiveness. They have identified the significance of their role as part of the school improvement process, by their responses to their own departmental development plans and what they would include in a school improvement plan. They have suggested that leadership begins with having a vision and that excellent leadership skills involve leading by example, having high expectations and taking risks.



Inspiring students to ‘work hard and be nice’: an international research visit to KIPP schools in Houston, Texas

Dionne Jude

11.1 | Introduction

The Knowledge is Power Programme (KIPP) was started in the USA in 1994 by Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin. They started with a fifth-grade class and three years later split to develop the first KIPP charter schools in Houston and New York. The majority of the students come from African-American or Hispanic backgrounds, with a high proportion of generational poverty and on free or reduced school meals. The founders’ main aim was to prove that coming from a disadvantaged background need not be a barrier to achievement.

To date, KIPP schools have achieved outstanding results and have sustained a record of high attainment, compared with many public schools. They are part of a growing movement of ‘no excuses’ free charter schools, with 99 schools (and counting) across the USA. The school day runs from 7:30 am to 5:00 pm, Monday to Thursday and finishes at 2:00 pm on Fridays. At some of the schools students are expected to attend two Saturdays a month from 8:30 am to 1:30 pm, as well as a two-week compulsory summer school. Students who attend KIPP spend 60 per cent more time in the classroom than students who attend state schools in the USA.

One of KIPP’s goals has been to increase the number of students that go on to further and higher education. During the early years of KIPP it was discovered that many students who went to university or other high schools either struggled or dropped out. For the founders this reinforced the idea that academic ability is just part of the equation to achieving success in education. Mike Feinberg has stated: *‘Teaching character strength is 49 per cent of what we do and 51 per cent is academic’*.

Promoting core values and building strength of character can assist with the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students, which is an aspect secondary schools in England will be judged on by Ofsted¹⁴. In 2011, students at St Mark’s produced the highest GCSE results the school has achieved so far. Also during this year, stakeholders including parents, students and members of staff were invited to contribute to the development of core values to inspire achievement, pro-social behaviour, and further inspire a school culture marked by respectful relationships, high expectations and a spirit of service. The core values chosen were: trust, hope and love – which transcend racial, cultural, religious and class differences.

¹⁴ Ofsted Framework, 2012

11.2 | Research aims

The aim of this research was to discover how KIPP schools promote and instil core values and character strength, to help students excel in both their academic achievement and behaviour. In KIPP schools the promotion of core values and character education is considered to be an integral part of assisting students with academic excellence and progression on to further and higher education. The KIPP school philosophy has been summed up as 'work hard, be nice'; described as 'the yin-yang that make our schools come alive, and that we believe are necessary for the success of our students in college and life¹⁵.'

11.3 | Methodology

The methods of data collection consisted of: secondary research including the review of several research and KIPP school reports; face-to-face semi-structured interviews with Mike Feinberg (co-founder), three school leaders (principals), teachers, students, and support staff; and classroom observations in KIPP middle and high schools. Three KIPP schools were visited in total: KIPP Houston High School (the first founding school), KIPP Spirit Middle School, and KIPP Generations Collegiate (College prep).

11.4 | Key findings

At KIPP schools, values and character strengths actively guide many aspects of school life, and during the visits it was evident that they stood at the heart of inspiring students to achieve academic excellence, ensuring behavioural expectations were upheld. The following five key areas capture the ways in which students are inspired to 'work hard and be nice', and outline how building strength of character takes place at KIPP.

¹⁵ KIPP Foundation website <http://www.kipp.org/> Accessed 23/05/12

1) Partnership between home and school

Home visits – before a student starts at a KIPP school he or she is visited at home so that staff can meet the family. Getting to know the family is a crucial part of gaining parental support, ensuring both parent and student are aware of the academic and behavioural expectations.

Commitment to Excellence contract – this is signed during the home visit by the student, parents and visiting teacher and is re-signed at the beginning of each year. This is a pledge which outlines the individual responsibilities, clearly communicating expectations to assist students with achieving their best at school and beyond.

2) Focus on college/university

Names of year groups – every year group at KIPP is named after the year the students will attend college/university. For example, a high school year that will be going to college three years from now will have the name 'The class of 2015'. All over the schools there are banners and posters, and sometimes this is printed on the students' uniform (t-shirts and hoodies).

College preparatory programme – starting at middle school (KS3), students have weekly collegiate classes, to provide them with the skills they need to get into college or university. Topics include: writing personal statements, completing course application forms, researching careers for job studies; and choosing courses. Parents are invited to attend workshops advising them of application processes, scholarships, college readiness, financial aid etc.

KIPP through college – all KIPP high schools provide a service to support students with applying for college or university, and to maintain their placements once they get there. Most campuses have a high school placement officer, college counsellor, and alumni support advisers, who also arrange college/university tours and connect students with mentors at colleges and universities.

Wall of honour – all of the visited KIPP schools had university flags placed on a 'wall of honour' or around the school, to showcase the higher education institutions that students have gone on to. When the students leave they are given a black plaque (engraved with their name and place of study). They are asked to return it (with their university flag) once they have successfully completed their first semester, at a school-wide assembly where the students present their plaques to the principal or KIPP founders. Their plaque is placed on the wall for all to see, in order to inspire younger students.

Letters of acceptance display – at KIPP Houston High School, students are only allowed to graduate if they provide a letter of acceptance from a university. These letters are displayed on a wall in the school so other students can see them. High school acceptance letters for middle school students are also displayed in corridors of the middle school.

Senior capstone projects – at KIPP Generations, final year students (equivalent to Year 13) have to complete a final piece of work that enables students to demonstrate and display the knowledge and skills they have developed during their time at KIPP. The projects are based on higher education and career choices.

3) Character education

Core values – each school chooses its own set of core values and character strengths that it would like the students to work towards.

Inspirational quotes – throughout the schools there were visible statements of the core ethical and performance values, displayed as acronyms, motivational quotes and sayings, in order to motivate and inspire each person to be, do and have the best they can. These can be found in the school buildings, in classrooms, in the canteen, on school promotional material, on the website etc.

Character awards – students and advisory (tutor) groups are given rewards for displaying character strengths within school.

Character report – KIPP Spirit uses a character report to encourage students to engage in actions that develop and demonstrate good character, and is sent home for parents to sign on a fortnightly basis.

4) Teaching and learning

Dual-purpose experiences – character education is not a separate subject at KIPP schools, and teachers are expected to make connections between the course content they teach and character strengths. They are expected to make regular comments on performance, and praise, acknowledge and reward students who show character strengths or live up to the schools values.

Summer activities and further learning opportunities – all the KIPP schools visited provided students with information about summer activities, through regular announcements about courses or schemes during class time, and activities displayed on notice boards around the school and in classrooms.

Lifework – KIPP students have two or three hours' homework each evening. Students can telephone teachers until 9pm with questions about their homework. At KIPP Spirit Middle School homework is called 'Lifework', which gives a positive feel to the work that is set.

KIPP Block – all KIPP students have enrichment classes as part of their timetable.

5) Rewards and sanctions

KIPP paycheck/gold card – each student carries these around so teachers and members of staff can give merits and demerits to help them track their behaviour and character development. This also serves as a weekly communication system between home and school, as parents have to sign them at the end of each week. Students are encouraged to live according to the school's values, show positive behavioural change and achieve learning targets, as merits are turned into 'KIPP dollars'. Students can spend these at the school store, trading their rewards for pencils, t-shirts, trips etc. Students are issued demerits when they are not meeting the expectations of the school.

Community service – community service encourages students to make positive contributions by taking part in activities that are helpful to the school and local community.

Uniform – the uniform serves a joint purpose of providing a sense of belonging and an incentive. All year groups have a different uniform, some of which includes positive messages, and reminders of the character strengths.

The porch or the bench – one of the popular sayings encouraged by the founders is 'If you can't run with the big dogs, stay on the porch.' This was a quote taken from one of the teachers that inspired them (Harriett Ball). This roughly translates into 'If you are not going to work hard and do your best you need to somewhere else.'

Advisory groups – these are tutor groups providing time for students and teachers to meet in a small group setting to set academic goals, assess community needs, create ideas for meeting those needs, and plan and co-ordinate projects. In advisory groups students can also discuss other issues related to their learning and social concerns.

Reward trips – end-of-year trips are also earned. They vary from school to school. KIPP Middle School Houston has sent fifth-graders to Washington DC, to Broadway plays, sightseeing and on college and university visits.

11.5 | Conclusion

KIPP schools have shown that inspiring students to build character and achieve academically can be accomplished by encouraging and rewarding the display of core values, which are broken down into simple, practical and observable behaviours that can be measured in a meaningful way, on a regular basis. 'Work hard, be nice' provides an over-arching philosophical principle which is widely shared, accepted and publicly celebrated.

For character education to become part of the school consciousness, parents, students and members of staff need to feel it is just as important as academic achievement. However, a 'no-excuses' approach and continuous exposure to values are only possible if they are part of the school's overall vision, and are championed by senior leadership: everyone needs to be consistently relaying the same messages.

Motivating students to do well should be delivered in a way that includes both intrinsic (moral – doing the right thing) and extrinsic (rewards and sanctions) methods. This enables students to take responsibility with a proactive approach to their achievement and behaviour, rather than simply reacting to what they believe others want from them. Linking sanctions and rewards explicitly to character and values enables students to discuss, explain and recognise the consequences of their actions; and helps them to learn from mistakes, increase their self-esteem, deal with conflict better and repair relationships through restorative methods. This approach also provides a joint language for teachers and students to discuss incidents and can reduce the number of disciplinary referrals, thus reducing the amount of time students spend out of class. Also, merits are not just marks on paper; students can trade them for something tangible.

Finally, the KIPP schools visited provide a multi-faceted approach to developing young people who are well prepared academically and socially. Their role as educators goes beyond the teaching of academic subject matter to positively affect the values, beliefs, attitudes, skills and capabilities, behaviour and everyday habits of their students. They have proven approaches to seamlessly integrating character strengths and core values into many aspects of teaching and school life, and this is just the start.



Attainment and achievement of Year 10 students

John Igein

12.1 | Introduction

Under-achievement as a concept is seen by one school of thought as the notion that:

'each individual has a more-or-less fixed potential (their ability or intelligence); that this potential could be measured accurately (e.g. by IQ tests) and that there is little that could be done to increase a learner's potential'.

Another school of thought views it as:

'the consequence of ineffective educational practices, which prevent the (unknown) potential of learners being realised'.

It is this latter notion that St Mark's Church of England Academy ascribes to.

12.2 | Research aims

This independent quantitative research project looked at the attainment and achievement of the Year 10 students at St Mark's Academy and its aim of developing a whole school approach to raising the achievement of these students.

12.3 | Methodology

A quantitative study was conducted to measure changes in students' attainment and achievement; and the progress and degree of inclusion of certain students who are deemed to be underachievers.

Students' achievement in both English and mathematics was investigated since arguably there is a strong degree of correlation in that students who gain a GCSE in both subjects generally tend to achieve five or more GCSEs at A*-C. Data relating to Year 10 students was analysed, including pupil level attainment data and target level at the end of Key Stage 3, so that a measure of progress could be derived and projected to the end of Year 11.

12.4 | Key findings

Key findings for mathematics based on results at the end of Key Stage 3

- Actual percentage of students achieving levels 5–8 = 74.9 per cent
- Target percentage of students achieving levels 5–8 = 67.6 per cent
- 37 students joined the school without any KS2 data.
- From the result, it is clear that a significant percentage of students (52.9 per cent) made two or more levels of progress during KS3, which is considerably higher than the target of 45.6 per cent.
- A plan needs to be put in place to tackle achievement of lower ability groups.

Key findings for English based on results at the end of Key Stage 3

- Around 21 per cent of the cohort had no KS2 data on arrival at the Academy.
- The entire cohort has a target of two levels of progress.
- Students make good progress even when coming in significantly below the national average in terms of attainment. There does not seem to be a significant correlation between the entry level of students and their ability to make two levels of progress.
- 76 per cent of students with data present at KS2 made two levels of progress.

12.5 | Conclusion

After examination of the research project results, the following recommendations were made and after careful consideration by the Academy, are to be adopted:

- Conduct an audit to identify areas where work needs to be prioritised to raise attainment and achievement.
- Develop effective intervention measures, providing training for teachers and a mentoring programme for students at all levels/years.
- At all levels, use data more effectively to design intervention strategies; further training and support are required.
- Involve governors more effectively in raising attainment and achievement.
- Provide more focused training for all teachers in raising attainment and achievement and an effective model of good practice that can be shared among teachers to inform future planning.
- Continue to build the confidence of students as achievers.
- Establish a more robust behaviour policy to tackle underachievement.
- Increase parental involvement by, for example, establishing parents' groups and in addition to parents' evenings, providing curriculum workshops and developing a more effective means of communicating with parents.
- Track more closely the specific groups that are likely to underachieve.
- Integrate more closely the pastoral support for underachieving students.
- Provide extra resources such as funding and impetus for existing and new initiatives.
- Improve awareness of whole-school attainment and achievement at classroom level.
- Develop the knowledge and understanding of the specific issues facing students and equip teachers with the skills to respond to them.



What type of plenaries would be of most benefit to EAL boys in Year 9?

Petra Guwa, Leighton Ledgister, Gifty Ghansah

13.1 | Introduction

St Mark's Academy's diverse student population includes students from over 50 different countries speaking more than 50 home languages. Currently, around 39 per cent of our whole school pupil cohort is on the English as an Additional Language (EAL) register. The EAL register is a vital document to the Academy and is updated regularly and shared with all staff. Every EAL pupil in the Academy is regarded as an individual with specific strengths and needs and is given every opportunity to achieve his or her potential.

This research project considered the impact on learning and overall effectiveness of plenaries, and how plenaries impact on students' participation and enjoyment in lessons. The case study focuses on EAL boys in Year 9. At the moment this cohort makes up 23.6 per cent of the current Year 9 at St Mark's.

13.2 | Research aims

The research aimed to identify the most effective ways of students reviewing their learning through plenaries, and to identify ways of using different forms of reviewing strategies in lessons.

13.3 | Methodology

To achieve the research aims, students were asked the following questions:

- Which types of plenaries best support your learning?
- What is the best time in the lesson to give plenaries?
- How many minutes should a mini-plenary last?
- How many plenaries should there be in a lesson?
- Do you think plenaries help you to assess your learning?
- Which plenary style suits you?

Action research was used for this project. The methods employed were questionnaires and student interviews. The questionnaires sampled 30 out of 34 Year 9 EAL boys, and were administered in lessons. Students were asked six different questions regarding pace, timing, style, and the best times to give plenaries in lessons. Secondary data was used to gather the list of Year 9 EAL boys from the school's EAL register and the questionnaires were used to gather the primary data.

13.4 | Key findings

Students were asked how many minutes they thought a mini-plenary should be. Most of the students responded that they thought a mini-plenary should last between four and six minutes. None of the students wanted a plenary longer than 10 minutes.

Students were asked which types of plenaries best support their learning. Students responded that the most preferred type of plenary is open questions to the whole class, whereas the least preferred types were building flow-charts and questions directed to individuals.

Students were asked what time in the lesson is the best time for a plenary. Most students preferred plenaries at the end of the lesson.



Students were asked how many plenaries should there be in a lesson. Most of the students preferred a single plenary in a lesson but there were a significant number of boys who thought there should be more than one plenary.

Students were asked whether they thought that plenaries helped them to assess their learning. Almost all students thought that plenaries help them assess their learning.

Students were asked which learning plenary styles best suited them. The most preferred learning plenary styles were the use of pictures and diagrams, and speaking and listening.

13.5 | Conclusion

The next steps from this research will be to:

- share findings with all Academy staff
- extend the research with different year groups, or groups of girls and boys, to gain a broader picture of how plenaries impact on students' learning and how this knowledge could be taken forward and used on a whole-school basis.







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