
1 Underachieving Pupils, Underachieving Schools: What Pupils Have to Say

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INTRODUCTION

The school improvement movement, it can be argued, has been responsible for the drift away from inner-city schools to those perceived as higher achieving in that they are able to produce, with a given population, better results at GCSE, which are quite crudely described as percentage pass rates and published in respectable newspapers.

The progress that schools help individuals to make relative to their different starting points is usually referred to as 'value added', and more recently this has helped to temper the emphasis on results. However, it could be argued that this indexing is less likely to be taken into account by most parents than the bare facts.

The Government of the day in 1988 chose to introduce national testing to drive up standards; however, the effects on those schools that service our more deprived communities have been quite devastating. The emphasis on standards, combined with the Ofsted inspection regime, has led to the labelling of schools, which has seriously damaged the staff of those schools, the pupils who attend them and the communities where they are located. The effect of this policy has been to create a quasi-market (Gerwartz, Ball and Bowe, 1995) where the concentration of pupils who may be described as 'hard to reach' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2004) has become higher in our inner cities than elsewhere.

The current Government, while propagating the standards agenda, has also unveiled what might be seen as a contradictory policy, where schools are seen as the hub of the community providing extended services in a climate where every child matters (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). The standards agenda and the resulting publication of league tables have led to a climate whereby schools compete with each other for pupils (the quasi-market). Extended services is the platform by which ECM (Every Child Matters), change for children, is to be delivered, and this is highly dependent on schools collaborating and working in partnership with each other as well as with other agencies and services. The

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notion of a quasi-market is not conducive to such collaboration and, for some schools, makes the positive outcomes laid out in the ECM agenda that much more difficult to achieve.

This chapter explores some of the factors relating to contradictions in these agendas but, more importantly, seeks to explore the voice of the pupil in a school that has struggled, in a disaffected community, to meet government targets with the threat of Ofsted and HMI visits looming large. The views of some staff are also reflected here, as it is the interplay between these two sets of views that can be seen as pivotal to the process of becoming a more effective school and thus delivering better outcomes for young people.

THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL

The school in question is located in a northern post-industrial city that has undergone much growth and restoration in recent years. With the expansion of service industries, good rail links to the capital and a thriving nightlife, it has also been described as a twin-track city, as not all parts of it have enjoyed this restoration or benefited from the economic growth.

The school itself is located in one of the inner-city areas that has not enjoyed the growth and prosperity described and so the social mix of the school has become skewed over time. Information from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) suggests that the:

- eligibility for free school meals is in the highest benchmark group for social deprivation used by Ofsted and the DfES;
- percentage of pupils for whom English is not their first language is five times higher than for the city as a whole;
- percentage of pupils in public care is five times the equivalent figure for the city as a whole;
- proportion of pupils from black and minority ethnic groups (BME) is four times higher than for the city as a whole;
- proportion of pupils with special educational needs is higher than for the city as a whole.

On the Index of Multiple Deprivation for 2004, 55.5% of pupils lived in the 10% most deprived 'super output areas' (SOAs) in the country and 72.5% were resident in the 20% most deprived SOAs.

The school's results were below the Government's floor targets of 20% in all core subjects, and value added (progress made in those areas relative to the starting point of the pupils) was poor. The rate of attendance was 85.8%, and unauthorized absence above 5%. According to data available from the DfES, these rates of attendance lie in the tenth decile nationally (a way of ranking schools into ten groups).

THE COHORT

The group of pupils selected for this study all had SATs results deemed to be average at transfer to secondary school but failed to reach the levels predicted for them at the end of Key Stage 3. The group fairly reflected the ethnic mix of the school. Girls were over-represented in the cohort of underachievers (62%), whereas only 46% of the year group were female.

Pupils were interviewed in focus groups. Focus groups in themselves are not seen as unproblematic and some of the issues they raise are explored in Chapter 10 of this book. Issues around focus groups and the interpretation of data are also explored in some depth in Turner (2005). A small sample of staff interviews were also carried out to examine how far the pupil and staff views coincided or differed. This difference itself might be seen as a factor in underachievement.

THEORIES OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT

An analysis of literature relating to underachievement would suggest that explanations fall into four main categories that are:

SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The notion that schools can make a difference (Reynolds, 1976 Rutter *et al.*, 1979; Mortimore, 1991; Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995) also allows that schools can be blamed for not making a difference. When pupils underachieve, therefore, it is the school that has failed to add value and which will come under scrutiny. The pressure to raise achievement in order to meet targets and therefore raise standards became greater with the advent of notions of school improvement being linked to targets, where parental choice means that pupils can drift away from those schools seen not to be improving at an appropriate rate. Pupil achievement is therefore central to school improvement.

PSYCHOLOGICAL (PSYCHOSOCIAL)

Psychologists have looked for explanations of pupil underachievement in the research on motivation (Ausubel, 1968; Maslow, 1987; Howe, 1999), locus of control (Rotter, 1975; Bar-Tal *et al.*, 1980; Stipek and Weisz, 1981), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) and ego-identity (Erikson, 1963). Ideas about affiliation to social groups also play a part here. What is particularly pertinent here is the affiliation that pupils who are underachieving may feel to their peer group, particularly in a context where there is poor social mix, in that the predominant culture becomes a peer culture that is not pro-school.

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SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Sociologists look to ideas about social class and socio-economic status to account for educational underachievement. The idea of social mix in schools is discussed (Willms, 1992; Thrupp, 1999), a lack of which has been brought about in part by the school improvement agenda with its emphasis upon parental choice to drive up standards, leading to a drift away from inner-city schools by those in a better position to make such choices (Gerwirth, Ball and Bowe, 1995). It is argued by some sociologists that school effectiveness research has served to remove socio-economic status from the debate about educational standards (Hatcher, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1996).

BIOLOGICAL/GENDER

Ideas about biology and gender are also presented in the debate about underachievement. There has been much focus in recent years on the underachievement of boys, with some biological explanations including shorter attention span and less facility with language being put forward (Bleach, 1998), as well as gender-related ideas about 'laddishness' and masculinity (Covington, 1992; Connell, 1995; Jackson, 2002).

WHAT WE DID

A group of educational psychologists (EPs) worked with the school to identify the cohort of pupils in Year 10, set up two focus groups of one hour's duration and carried out a semi-structured group interview for each, with the focused topic of underachievement. The project was inspired in part by the work carried out by Pomerantz and Pomerantz (2002) focusing on 'able underachievers', where young people were given the opportunity to reflect on the causes of educational underachievement.

All participants in this study were given an option of whether to attend and were assured of individual and group confidentiality. Because of issues that arose in the second group, a third group was set up which was much smaller but gave some girls a voice that had not been heard in the second group because of the dominance of the boys. The interview material was transcribed and subjected to analysis using a method known as 'grounded theory' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This method of analysing data has its origins in the field of sociology and emphasizes the development of theory. The theory, however, is grounded in data drawn from actions, interactions and processes. Concepts and hypotheses from the field can then be used to generate theory. Such analysis goes beyond language and takes into account processes at work, in a group for example. As a method of analysis it moves from description to conceptual ordering to theorizing. Originally an empirical, positivist method where theory emerges from data, the Strauss and Corbin method recognizes the role of the researcher in making deductions from the data and brings into that process the researcher's own knowledge and experience. The researcher then plays a creative

role, and there is a legitimate interplay between data and researcher. The method itself has three stages, those of:

- open coding, where concepts are uncovered and named;
- axial coding, where categories found at the first stage are related to each other at the level of properties and dimensions;
- selective coding, where the theory is integrated and refined.

As this was an action research project the school was consulted at each stage. It was decided that it would be useful to ask a sample of school staff the same questions about underachievement as had been put to the pupils. The sample included a newly qualified teacher (NQT), a head of year (HOY), who was also a teacher of humanities, a learning mentor (LM), a behaviour support worker (BSW) and a special needs assistant (SNA).

The two sets of views were compared around the key themes that emerged.

WHAT THE PUPILS TOLD US

The key themes that emerged from the focus group interviews to account for underachievement were as follows:

- teaching and learning;
- relationships with adults;
- relationships with peers;
- climate and environment.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

ISSUES IDENTIFIED

Some of the pupils in this study felt that the quality of teaching that they received was not of the same quality as in other schools, and that other schools not only had better teachers but also had better facilities. It was also felt that support staff did not always know the subject area to which they were designated.

Relevance of the subject being taught was also raised as an issue, either they could not see the point of what was being taught or they felt that a topic had been covered previously at primary level and they did not understand why it was being revisited.

Boredom was an issue with too much teacher talk and too much copying being cited by some as a barrier. On the other hand, it was felt that better explanations by teachers would help them to understand the topic better, and so a lack of adequate explanation was cited as a barrier, and this also ties in with their ideas about quality of teaching (initials 'LT' denote the researcher):

Pupil They're not fully qualified. Mr X – he teaches maths but he doesn't teach it.

Pupil He just has us copy examples.

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- Pupil He gives us a piece of paper and tells us to copy examples.
 Pupil I don't like writing a lot really.
 LT So writing's not good? Anybody else agree with that? That writing isn't. . .
 Pupil All we do is copy off the board.
 Pupil And my hand starts to hurt.
 LT So copying and writing you're not too keen on at all?
 Pupil It's not that I don't like writing, it's that I don't like copying.
 LT What kind of things could help you do better at school or achieve better results?
 Pupil To have proper teachers instead of supplies.
 LT So to have permanent teachers instead of supply teachers?
 Pupil Yeah.
 Pupil To have easier work.
 Pupil And hard work.
 Pupil They give us stuff what we've already done.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

The pupils describe teachers who explain subject content well, guide them along rather than just writing information on the board and favour a step-by-step approach. This is not the same as a lot of teacher talk but rather is about the teacher giving structured guidance. Another example was cited where the group was small and the pupils were able to sit round the teacher while he explained things to them 'to a T':

- LT What do you think helps you to learn? Can you think of. . .?
 Pupil Decent teachers.
 LT Tell me what you mean by decent teachers.
 Pupil That they explain it good enough.
 LT OK, so a decent teacher means they explain it well to you.
 Pupil Explain it more than once.

Many pupils cited practical lessons as their favourites, and there was clearly a greater sense of engagement for subjects like PE, IT, drama and art. Demonstration, as in science, was seen as helpful when it occurred. Pupils felt that having some 'fun' in the lessons helped them to learn. There was a clear view that they would only work if the work was enjoyable. Some pupils felt that doing a lot of writing, although not copying, helped them to learn but recognized that others in the group did not agree with this. In coursework, there seemed to be a lot of variety where different methods of learning could take place, and to some extent the pupils could do their own research and work more independently. Some pupils felt that they needed to be given more work than they currently had.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS

ISSUES IDENTIFIED

Pupils raised the issue of support and how they felt that they did not get enough support from staff. This, in turn, tied into feelings of fairness and unfairness. There was a strong perception in one group that support was directed mainly to those pupils who did well at school (the teacher's pet) or pupils with special needs. For this group, who were neither, they felt that their learning needs were largely unmet. They felt that some teachers did not give them adequate explanations in terms of what they needed to do in a lesson.

Responses from all of the groups suggest that they felt that they needed more support from teachers and support staff:

- Pupil No, but the teachers, they're always around other pupils in your class like and you're shouting your teacher and they're always around the teacher's pet. They're getting it so you're not getting attention because the teacher's pet's getting it.
- LT Can we say what kinds of pupils teachers give most attention to?
- Pupil The ones that are already on the second book in class.
- Pupil The ones that have got two exercise books and stuff like that.
- LT They're doing better and so they get more help?
- Pupil It's basically who they want to help.
- LT How do they make the choices?
- Pupil They're trying to say they don't want to help the second class.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Support is a key issue here with pupils feeling that it can come from various sources: teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and peers. Mentors are also recognized as helping with learning. Pupils felt that more support in lessons would help them to learn but that this should be given by a teacher qualified to teach that curriculum area and that the non-teaching staff should also be familiar with the subject matter. There was also an implication that support should be given in a more even-handed and fair way.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

ISSUES IDENTIFIED

Pupils often saw peers as a source of support, and several expressed the view that they liked to work with their friends in class. For some, friends were synonymous with those pupils working at the same level, but when a friend who was not working at the same level needed help in class they would give it. Peers were mentioned equally with family as a source of support.

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Others held the view that friends ought to be split up in lessons because they could be a source of distraction. The behaviour of other pupils in class was a negative influence, and the girls particularly cited the behaviour of boys.

Teasing and name-calling by boys was an issue for some girls but they also said that girls would intimidate them too. There was a mixed view about whether this was bullying or not. One of the boys, who wanted to work for GCSEs, revealed that other pupils often called him a 'geek':

- LT So, when you are there, what gets in the way?
 Pupil The boys.
 LT Boys? What is it the boys do that gets in the way?
 Pupil Teasing, calling you names.
 LT Are they teasing you?
 Pupils All of us.
 LT Do they tease the girls generally?
 Pupils Yaah.
 Pupil Especially me.
 Pupil Some of the girls intimidate you.
 LT Some of the girls? So there are some girls who also behave like the boys?
 What do the girls do?
 Pupil Just start on you, like two of them.
 Pupil Depends what side you get on them: some of them are all right.
 LT Are they intimidating in lessons or out of lessons?
 Pupil Out of lessons sometimes.
 Pupil Both.
 LT When the boys are behaving badly in lessons and girls are being intimidating, what do the teachers do?
 Pupil Nothing. They just stand there watching.

The influence of friends was raised when they would try to get another pupil to truant from school or from a lesson.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Peers could be a useful source of support, and some favoured working in groups – although this was not a universal view. Pupils preferred to choose their own groups and work with other pupils to whom they could relate. For some, this meant working with pupils at the same learning level as themselves.

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT**ISSUES IDENTIFIED**

Pupils felt that there was not a relaxed enough atmosphere in some lessons and that teachers needed to 'chill out' more. They also perceived a lack of praise and positive rewards and felt that a greater emphasis was placed on punishment.

Some pupils talked about 'bad people' getting in the way of learning, and by that they meant those pupils who misbehaved in class. They also complained about people coming in from the corridors and running around making a noise:

- LT What gets in the way of you working or learning? What does distract you?
 Pupil Bad people.
 LT So what do people do to distract you?
 Pupil Just talk.
 Pupil Throw things at you.
 Pupil Constantly make noise.
 Pupil Flick bogies at you.
 Pupil And they call me 'geek'.
 Pupil Lots of people from the corridors, they come in.
 Pupil They open the doors.
 Pupil When they're running about and making noise as well.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Some pupils felt that a quiet, tidy classroom helped them to learn. There was some difference in view as to whether it was better to allow a degree of talking amongst pupils, that there was a balance between too much talking and no talking at all. Listening and concentration were seen as important to learning. A teacher making a pupil sit on his or her own was sometimes seen to be an advantage, while other views favoured working with friends or in groups.

There was a view that teachers spent a lot of time on disciplinary issues (always yelling at someone) and that some classes were not strict enough. Although they felt that in school as a whole there were lots of rules, this did not apply to some lessons. This was particularly attributed to young or new teachers. Some pupils felt that they did better when there was a more relaxed atmosphere in the class, when the teacher was calm.

Some pupils felt that they would be motivated by more rewards in school. Stickers and tickets to football matches were both mentioned as tangible rewards.

STAFF VIEWS ON UNDERACHIEVEMENT

The key themes emerging from interviews with staff were:

- behaviour;
- outside influences/background/neighbourhood;
- motivation and goals;
- ethos;
- confidence – both staff and pupil;
- teaching and learning.

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BEHAVIOUR

Staff raised some key issues about behaviour in the school. Managing behaviour was seen as a distraction for the teacher, which affected the quality of teaching in the classroom. The overall impact of staff absence was noted, and this affected the general atmosphere around school, allowing 'hot spots' (areas of the school building where problems occur most frequently) to exist in terms of movement around school and an atmosphere of indiscipline, which would spill over into lessons.

Staff readily acknowledged the importance of pupil image amongst their peers. It is acceptable neither to be seen to be doing well nor to have difficulty in learning. Both of these may lead to non-engagement in the lesson and, at its most extreme, create reasons to escape from the lesson by using misbehaviour as a mechanism to this end.

Issues with other kids – look at kids who achieve more, they cover up so not to be teacher's pet. This opens the door to bullying.

(Behaviour Support Worker)

These issues are explored in-depth in Chapter 2 of this book.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Outside influences were generally viewed in a negative way by staff, with home and parents not seen as supportive of their child's education.

So whereas in primary school the parent would sit down, help them with their homework and their understanding, when they come to the high school that has gone out of the window: the kids do not get that influence at home. The children get more responsibilities at home, i.e. looking after siblings, more cleaning, etc. They are rushing their homework, or sometimes they are too tired, they come to school in the morning bad-tempered and not ready to work because they have not gone to bed early enough.

(Learning Mentor)

MOTIVATION AND GOALS

Broader, societal issues were acknowledged that are particular to the area of the city in which the school in question is situated, lack of suitable jobs and the lack of positive role models in the community. More specifically, staff pointed to the competitive nature of the pupils as a motivational force and the idea that assessment was not only a competitive element but also a way of ensuring that pupils knew where they were and how they were doing in relation to school work. Staff enthusiasm was seen as an important factor in motivating pupils in a subject area.

Some are from disadvantaged backgrounds – no good role models out of school. Some boys can't see the point and there are no jobs.

(Behaviour Support Worker)

The enthusiasm of the staff, if the staff are enthusiastic about their work, about their teaching, it is infectious and the pupils go the same way.

(Learning Mentor)

ETHOS

Getting the classroom ethos right was seen as a balance between managing behaviour and setting out expectations regarding standards of work.

For me it has been getting that sort of culture that within this lesson you will be expected . . . there are certain standards that you have got to meet. Not just behaviours but work as well, the work ethic within the classroom.

(Teacher/pastoral and Humanities)

CONFIDENCE

Staff recognized that some of the key issues for pupils related to their image within the peer group and its impact upon learning and accessing support. It is seen as unacceptable, in simple terms, to be either too bright or not bright enough. Pupils tread a fine line in trying to cover up either their enthusiasm for learning or their difficulty in understanding.

Some of the older children do not want to do any work; they think it is 'cool' to get sent out of the class rather than work. They also do this to avoid the work when they do not understand it: if you then offer them help, they do not accept it.

(Teaching Assistant)

Again, these issues are further explored in Chapter 2.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Staff views on teaching and learning centred around two areas: preferred learning styles of the pupils and issues of confidence, both teacher and pupil. It was readily understood that many pupils prefer practical lessons where they are actively involved and where time spent listening is limited.

The reticence of pupils to engage in question-and-answer type lessons may be related to a lack of confidence in being able to give a correct response and opening themselves up publicly to being wrong or, on the other hand, being right and being seen as a 'geek'.

A lot of kids can't be bothered with English, maths, history and geography. They are not very good at communicating with adults and they hate to get anything wrong. With question and answers, they will not give you the answers in case they get it wrong; they think they might say it in the wrong way or in the wrong manner so it's understanding that.

(Learning Mentor)

Teacher confidence also plays a part here as a lack of confidence may lead to the planning of lessons that feel safe and may therefore be rather more dull than

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where teachers are prepared to take a risk in planning something interesting and participative.

I think a lot of staff, especially that are new to school or new to teaching, will probably have issues regarding their [own] confidence and their ability, which has a massive effect on what you are prepared to do in the classroom.

(Teacher/pastoral and Humanities)

DIFFERENCES IN VIEW BETWEEN STAFF AND PUPILS

In some cases, the staff's and pupils' views broadly coincided. This was the case with many aspects of teaching and learning, classroom ethos and to some extent peer group influence. It was also of interest to note where pupils raised concerns that were not alluded to by staff and vice versa.

PUPILS' CONCERNS OVER RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS

The issue of lack of support was a significant concern to pupils, and there were grounds for saying that this was a relationship issue because it was perceived as unfair or equating to a lack of attention or even protection from teachers and support staff. For staff, pupils did not access support because of peer group influences (too embarrassed to ask for help or concerned about being seen as too academic):

LT Are there any things that would help you?

Pupil If the teachers were more supportive.

LT Tell me what that supportive would look like. In what way could they be more supportive to you?

Pupil Like notice that people are saying things to you and helping you with your work more and being more kinder.

Pupils' Concerns Regarding Fairness

Although an important issue for pupils, staff did not perceive their behaviour or the behaviour of other adults as unfair, although they did recognize that pupils may deliberately get into trouble to avoid being exposed when work was too difficult.

You could just be sat there and that's how you get in trouble. You're just sat there and you don't know what you're doing. You ask the teacher and they just don't listen to you.

(Pupil)

Pupils' View that Peer Influence Can be Positive or Supportive

Some staff acknowledged that pupils (mainly girls) could be a source of support for each other but perceived staff as giving pupils most support with their work, whereas pupils viewed peers as a key source of support:

Pupil I've got loads of friends.

LT Have you?

Pupil Yeah.

LT So when you are with them, you mean just if they're in the same room as you or do you have to be able to work with them?

Pupil Yeah. 'Cos they help you as well, don't they?

Pupil 'Cos in subjects as well, they help you.

Adults' View About Home Background as Negative or Unsupportive Influence

While a staff view emerged that pupils did not get the support they needed at this age from home, some pupils mentioned home as a source of support in their work.

Adults' View that Learning Difficulties or Lack of Understanding Play a Part

While some staff believed that pupils would not ask for or accept support because of protecting their self-image, pupils felt that support was withheld from them because it was focused on other pupils (those with special educational needs or those who were higher achievers or more hard working).

Adults' View that Lack of Confidence Plays a Part

Confidence was raised by staff as a factor for both pupils and staff (see staff views on teaching and learning above), while this was not an area that pupils ever touched upon.

Learning needs to be more personalized. Individual learning would overcome difference in academic levels – affects confidence. Confidence is important.

(Learning Mentor)

Figure 1.1 illustrates the degree to which the key themes for staff and pupils coincided and in which areas they differed. While there was a common view in relation to teaching and learning, climate and environment, behaviour and the negative aspects of peer group relationships as all having an impact upon achievement, there were also key differences. The pupils in this study clearly had a more negative view of relationships with adults in the school and the impact of this upon their levels of achievement, and were also able to attach more positive benefits to peer relations in supporting their learning. The staff highlighted confidence as an issue for both pupils and staff, the lack of goals and motivation of pupils as affecting performance and outside influences (both familial and in terms of the wider community) as either unsupportive to learning or as detrimental to achievement.

The process of examining views of both groups in this study was enlightening, and decisions had to be made during the process about the meaning of certain statements and about the key themes that could be inducted (concepts are uncovered and named) and deducted from the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) maintain that in their approach to grounded theory analysis the interplay between researcher and data is recognized and that at the heart of theorizing lies an interplay between induction and deduction.

Pupil view	Shared Pupil and Staff View	Staff view
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Relationships with adults in school (negative perceptions) ⊙ Peer relationships (as key source of support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Teaching and Learning ⊙ Climate/environment/ ⊙ Ethos ⊙ Behaviour ⊙ Peer relationships/ ⊙ Influences (emphasis on negative) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⊙ Confidence (lack of) ⊙ Goals/motivation (lack of) ⊙ Outside influences (negative perceptions)

Figure 1.1. Overlap and separateness in pupils' and staff's views of key factors in achievement and underachievement.

The researcher therefore has an important role as part of the process and cannot be seen as neutral. The researcher is legitimately more than a witness in the process and plays an active part in constructing a particular understanding of phenomena.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARED MEANING

The construction of meaning is an important element in this study when we consider the overlap and separateness of pupil and staff views on key factors in achievement and underachievement. There are significant differences in the key themes in the study that equate to the very areas which create our sense of self; relationships and confidence are central to this.

Frederick Erickson asks:

What are the conditions of meaning that students and teachers create together, as some students appear to learn and others don't . . . How is it that it can make sense to students to learn in one situation and not in another? How are these meaning systems created and sustained in daily interactions?

(Erickson, 1986, p. 127)

This highlights for us the importance of developing shared meanings and, therefore, it could be argued, the shared value systems so important at this crucial stage of development, which are based upon daily interactions that we can translate into

interpersonal relationships, the building blocks of identity or sense of self. In a climate where pupils are not succeeding in school or where they cannot see its relevance, or where relationships are not positive, values may be constructed with peers that may be frowned upon by the adult community of the school. Farrell (1990) argues that students cannot value the opinions of those who do not give them positive reinforcement and will value those who do. He points out that values cannot be imposed but must be co-constructed. The issue of rewards and positive reinforcement was one raised by pupils in this study and also by staff, and so these pupils may have had stronger affiliations to their peer groups, who do reinforce them in some way.

THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL MIX

School effectiveness research, it is maintained (Thrupp, 1999), gives explanations for underachievement that are about 'blaming schools' for not making a difference because if it can be demonstrated that schools can make a difference, they are clearly doing something wrong if they can't. This body of knowledge and the School Improvement Movement, it is argued, are socially decontextualized, little account being taken of issues such as social mix, with 'the new right' holding schools directly accountable for their outcomes with little or nothing to say about the interactions between student culture, the culture of the community and the official culture of the school. As described earlier in this chapter, the culture of the school has to be co-constructed and cannot be imposed by one group upon another. For some schools, this imposition has become an uphill struggle. Marketing and league tables have led to a further imbalance in social mix (Gerwitz, Ball and Bowe, 1995) and the cultural capital brought to some schools by the middle classes is missing from others, thus creating a very different kind of pupil culture where the 'self as my work' and 'self as student' are not integrated with the 'self in peer group' or 'self as loyal friend' (Farrell, 1990). The pupils must be able to see a working life beyond school, to see themselves as a student engaged in the academic life of the school and its relevance to the working life beyond school, while integrating these two with a view of themselves as a member of a peer group, being a good 'mate'.

Farrell identifies students who were from the same socio-economic background as his 'drop out' students (students who did not remain at high school) but attended an elite high school in the same city. The difference he drew from their pro-school attitude was that these students had a peer group support system that constantly validated their belief in education. This elite school had therefore developed a culture where staff and students shared values and had a similarly constructed reality. As hypothesized earlier in this chapter, perhaps the schools with the most successful outcomes have a greater degree of overlap between staff and pupils (see Figure 1.1 above) than did the groups in this study, who had areas of similarity on some important issues but also had significant areas of difference.

Farrell also makes the point that schools are not just a physical space but also a mental space where meaning systems, what we might call the culture of the

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school, are constructed but not necessarily co-constructed by the key groups: staff and pupils.

The two groups obviously share part of an everyday reality, but there may be no overlap whatsoever in the mental spaces of school that constitute part of their circles of reality.

(Farrell, 1990, p 147)

ESTABLISHING SHARED VALUES

If we accept that members of the school community must share a broadly similar set of values in order to live and work productively alongside each other, then we must ask what possible processes might help to arrive at such a point.

Systems based on Restorative Justice can become a way of life in an organization and should positively influence the entire school ethos if adopted. Restorative Justice was originally founded as a way of bringing together offenders with victims but has been widened beyond actual offending to look at ways of managing conflict in schools. It is defined as:

A systematic response to wrongdoing that emphasizes healing the wounds of victims, offenders and communities caused or revealed by criminal behaviour.

(Restorative Justice, 2006)

Restorative approaches in the educational setting include such activities as peer mediation and circle time (healing circles) and stresses relationships over and above rules. According to the organization Transforming Conflict (www.transformingconflict.org) there are profound implications for school communities and they are strongly linked to citizenship. Restorative approaches are founded on philosophy and ethos, involve key skills such as active listening and problem-solving and entail key processes. These processes can be light touch, such as restorative enquiry and corridor conferences, through to community conferencing, setting up circle time activities and mediation systems. Restorative pedagogy is also advocated where teachers model the values and skills necessary for restoration. Wachtel (1999) describes a restorative practices continuum, which has at one end 'affective statements' and at the other the formal conference. The term 'restorative practices' is used to describe any response to wrongdoing that is both supportive and limit setting. Therefore, restoration does not have to be a system incorporating many formalized procedures but is intrinsic to the ethos of the establishment and must be seen within the whole context of the school's behaviour policy and approach to discipline. Like our criminal justice system, schools often adopt a punitive approach, with the ultimate punishment being exclusion from school. It is a major philosophical shift to embrace a restorative approach but one that puts the person and the relationship at the centre rather than the concept of punishment or consequences. This connects very directly with school ethos.

The process of examining views as a joint exercise between staff and pupils can lead to a greater shared understanding of the issues on both sides. This kind of dialogue,

in my experience, rarely if ever takes place in schools in any kind of formalized or structured way. Collaborative exercises between staff and pupils can help to establish a set of shared values, rather than one group imposing a set of values on another. This also opens up the possibility of involving parents in such a process so that values are truly established between staff, pupils and families.

Having established a set of shared values, it is important to keep those values alive and to refer to them frequently, and to ensure that they are active in shaping policy and any decisions that are made about the life of the school. Wood (2005) states:

If ever there was a time when schools should be re-asserting simple, common values it is now. In our community school . . . we start by asserting that we value learning. That is our purpose as an institution. We value respect for self and others, so that we can learn together. We value co-operation because we can achieve more together than we do separately. We value courtesy as a sign of our mutual respect. We value fairness, justice and tolerance, which create equal opportunities and reinforce respect. We value truth and honesty, the keys to trustful relationships. We value kindness, compassion and generosity because we are all made better by giving and receiving these virtues. We not only proclaim these values – from every notice board, in every classroom – but we teach them and we do our best to live them.

(Wood, 2005, p 5)

What is so refreshing about the statement made above is the emphasis on values rather than the trend that has grown in education of asserting a set of rules as part of a behaviour policy, often developed by staff and imposed on pupils, and sometimes written only by one person or a small group. Values have so much more potential to underpin discussion and decision-making and influence the way we live and learn than do a simple set of rules or expectations. Unfortunately, the latter became received wisdom in the world of behaviour management over the last decades. One of the clearest examples of this was the popularity of assertive discipline (Canter and Canter, 1982, 1992) in British schools in the post-Elton (1989) period.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Billington (2005) clearly articulates the view that professional practice must reflect the synergistic nature of feeling, thinking and learning. There are therefore new models to be drawn in the way that the profession of educational psychology supports schools, not only in considering individuals but also in looking at overall systems. For example, the way that educational psychologists (EPs) support schools by developing behaviour policies and putting them into practice must necessarily take into account a complex set of human interactions that go on within a school, and that have not always been taken into account in the simplistic 'rules, praise, ignore or consequences' models that were widely promoted following the Elton Report (1989).

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EPs are well positioned in their work with secondary schools to promote a model of adolescent development (Erikson, 1963; Kohlberg, 1981), which takes account of all aspects of feeling, thinking and learning and how these coincide with issues around transition linked to a decrease in motivation and an externalizing of locus of control. EPs have long promoted models of early childhood development, which have been helpful to parents, carers and those working in the early years' sector, but there has been a dearth of work that equally illuminates adolescent development.

EPs are also well positioned to promote activities in secondary schools that emphasize the importance of shared values and meanings between young people and adults in the school, as these are central to enjoying and achieving in the world of education.

Some of the vehicles for such work may lie in supporting schools in action research, including seeking pupils' views through focus groups and other research mechanisms, and in promoting restorative approaches in schools that value the emotional world of the individual. At the simplest level, these can be initiatives such as Circle Time and Peer Mediation. These last two are certainly not new to the work of EPs but may be part of an audit of what we already do which underpins the values of a profession that gives equal emphasis to feeling, thinking and learning and one that recognizes the need for a gestalt in the approach we take.

It is also important to recognize that, as the profession becomes part of the wider children's workforce, psychology is not solely the preserve of the EP but is shared by many other disciplines. What is important is what can be added by the application of psychology rather than who applies it. Much of the important work that is carried out in schools is undertaken by advisers, national strategy consultants, multi-agency support teams such as BESTs (Behaviour and Education Support Team) and education welfare officers, to name but a few, as well as by EP Services. The profession needs to find its place within a wider children's workforce rather than pondering for too long the age-old questions regarding unique contribution.

CONCLUSION

It is important that, in this chapter, the voices of the young people involved are heard. Ruddock, Chaplain and Wallace (1996) argue strongly that many failing schools could have been turned round if the views of pupils had been heard and acted upon, and ensuring that such action is taken is a challenge for researchers. Where schools are in challenging circumstances, whether recognized as an official category of concern or not, the sheer weight of day-to-day challenges may mean that acting upon pupil views is not a priority. In the case of this research we feared that action might not be taken, but the increased impetus of a new head teacher who values research and national drivers such as ECM and the new school Self Evaluation Form (SEF), which demonstrates that pupils' views have been taken account of and acted upon, have all helped to ensure that some action has been taken. The results of the case study school,

as expressed in A–C GCSE grades, have risen through a combination of factors but we would want to attribute some of the success to the voice of the pupils themselves.

We study people and we feedback our findings to those we have studied. Those people may or may not agree with what has been said about them. But whatever the outcome, the act of being studied makes people more aware and sensitive to those aspects of themselves that have been the subject of scrutiny. Increased self-awareness can lead to changes in values, attitudes and behaviour.

(Buchanan and Huczynski, 1985)

It may be difficult sometimes to see the direct impact of research, but it is suggested above that being part of a study in itself and having feedback from that study creates a heightened awareness, which in turn promotes change.

Giving pupils a voice is the first step towards understanding their thoughts and feelings and therefore their values. It is argued that in many schools the values of pupils, staff and community do not coincide, or at least do not coincide enough in order to share the physical, social and mental space which is the school. It is proposed that in creating a climate where values are shared, learning will take place. This can be an important starting point to break into the cycle of underachievement, whereas it is often more common to begin with teaching and learning or by examining behaviour and attitudes.

It can further be argued that the School Improvement Movement itself has done much to skew the social mix of our inner-city schools by creating a quasi-market based upon published league tables. This drift away from certain schools upsets the social mix and reduces the cultural capital of the school so that the prevailing culture is one of dominant peer group values, which are not pro-school or pro-learning.

In terms of the PricewaterhouseCoopers' (2004) definition of 'hard to reach' (see introductory chapter), these young people may be hard to see and hard to engage. They may not be immediately apparent as underachievers unless due weight is given to levels of attainment prior to transition. It is the evidence of the possibility of achievement, arising from outcomes at Key Stage 2, that gives a fuller picture of the unrealized potential of this group. They may then become hard to engage because of the many and complex issues around the culture of the school and of adult and peer relationships. The third category of 'hard to reach' might be hard to change, but at the same time one must allow that it is not the pupils who need to change first but the many elements of the context within which they are expected to learn. Pomerantz (Chapter 3) poses a number of questions or key messages for professionals, which resonate in part with the findings of this research, on how to ensure positive outcomes for young people who do not fulfil their educational potential because of the risk of exclusion.

The issue of being hard to see is relatively straightforward to address in that it requires rigorous systems of monitoring and tracking to be in place and for appropriate questions to be asked of available data. At a time when electronic contextualized PANDAs (Performance and Assessment Reports now known as RAISE on-line, Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation) are available

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to all schools and Local Authorities, the close interrogation of such data should be an integral part of the educational landscape. Being hard to engage with reference to this group of underachieving pupils presents a more complex challenge, and engagement will ultimately depend upon the nature of relationships that are established between adults in the school community, young people and their families, a welcoming and positive school ethos, good-quality teaching and learning experiences, a sense of purpose in education and a safe and supportive environment in which to learn. Adolescent identity, it is argued, is at the heart of this complex set of factors, and is impinged upon by factors around the identity of adults in the school. So who or what should change? The cycle of underachievement can only be broken if a number of factors change, including school mix, how relationships are built and maintained in schools and the way in which we give young people a voice in their own education.

When every child matters (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) in reality rather than in political rhetoric, we should see positive outcomes achieved in all five defined areas. A developing sense of identity, if negotiated successfully, should have as an outcome a healthy individual in the sense of being emotionally and mentally healthy, and we cannot dissociate physical health from this when we appreciate the interconnectedness of mind and body. Relationships, where they are positive, should bring about outcomes that support feelings of safety, for example being safe from bullying and intimidation, and should at the same time contribute to good emotional health. Teaching and learning, when successfully established, should allow all young people to enjoy school life and achieve their full potential. Where a positive ethos exists in a school, making a positive contribution to school life and to the community is more likely to be achieved. What lies outside of the immediate circle of the school is an environment where young people will be expected to achieve economic well-being, in the community and in the world of work. This will be more likely if the relevance of school life can be clearly demonstrated, so that young people achieve their full potential. If every child and young person really *does* matter, they should matter regardless of postcode, or 'super output area', and they should not have a better chance of achieving each of the five outcomes if they live in one part of the city or another, or attend one school or another. The very issues which underpin school improvement currently, and the need to drive up standards, may actively work against these positive outcomes as schools 'fail' to raise standards and 'fail' to add value because of issues of social mix that this very drive to raise standards has created.

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