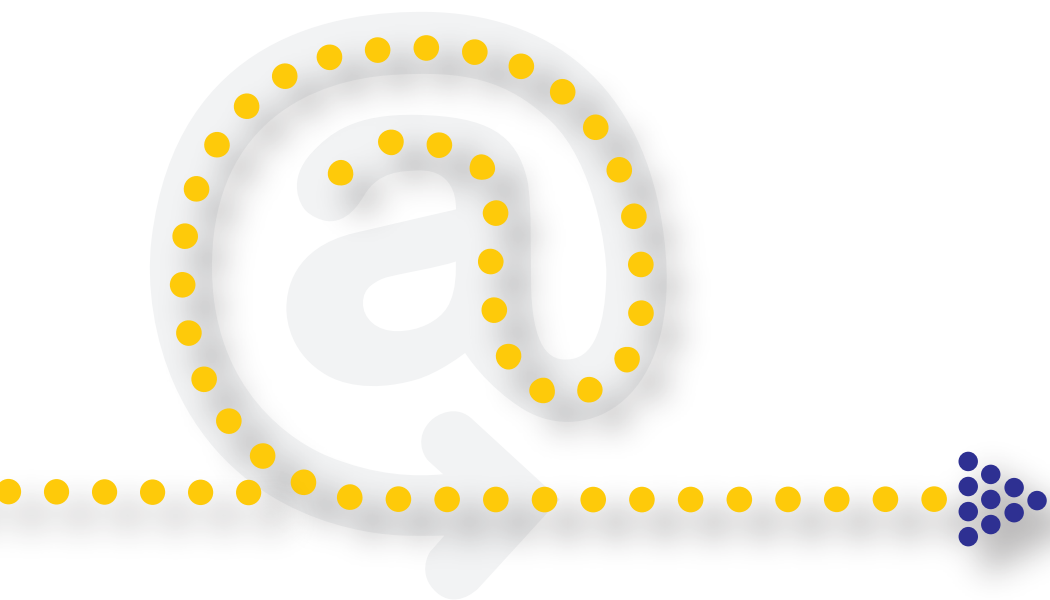


Freeing Schools: Shaping the Big Society



A REPORT FROM ANTIDOTE

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INTRODUCTION

Set up in 1997, Antidote works with schools to ensure all children and young people have the best possible opportunities to learn, grow and achieve.

Antidote has spent the past 10 years developing the PROGRESS Programme as a way of giving students, teachers and other staff the power and freedom to make their schools even better.

Freeing Schools: Shaping the Big Society describes how innovative programmes such as PROGRESS can raise standards by enabling schools to stimulate change from within.

While welcoming the government's plans for building the Big Society through a wider distribution of power, Antidote questions whether the measures currently proposed for giving freedom to schools can work on their own.

In addition to describing how the principles that underpin Antidote's PROGRESS Programme could strengthen implementation of the Big Society agenda, the report outlines:

- ▶ why schools improve when they give power and freedom to staff and students
- ▶ why promoting change from within will save millions in wasted expenditure and generate considerable added value
- ▶ what policymakers can do to achieve these savings and realise this value
- ▶ why the coalition government may find it hard to avoid the mistakes made by New Labour.

The case studies used in the report are of schools that have taken part in Antidote's PROGRESS Programme. Eight schools are featured, out of the 58 that have so far used the Programme, which has been delivered in a wide range of different settings and in places as far apart as Suffolk and Cardiff, Shropshire and Croydon.

Since the case studies involve descriptions of the internal dynamics in these schools, we have changed names and identifying details.

1 | I WOULD LEARN BETTER IF...

Antidote's PROGRESS Programme enables schools to improve by giving the whole school community, from the youngest student to the most senior member of the leadership team, the power and freedom to:

- ▶ describe how they experience the school
- ▶ think with others about what holds the school back from being as good as it can be
- ▶ generate new thinking about how to make things even better

The impact of the Programme comes from the way it uses everybody's experience and insight to generate deep understanding of what is happening and what needs to change, as well as creative ideas for making things even better.

The Programme challenges the tendency for schools to undertake initiatives that have no impact on the things they are trying to change. This is because the underlying causes have not been accurately identified. The eight case studies in this report all carry illustrations of this tendency.

At Hinksey Junior School (p. 32), the monitoring strategies imposed following an inspection caused staff to feel they had been judged and found wanting. The stress this provoked was picked up by students, who started to behave less well and become less engaged in their learning. When, by contrast, staff and students were enabled to explore together what would make learning more engaging, teaching, learning and behaviour all improved.

Antidote's work is relevant to the government's aim of building the Big Society because it shows that, when people are given the power and freedom to evolve strategies that improve their communities, they develop the necessary skills and tools. And the experience of being heard frees people up to find ways of improving their communities.

Policymakers generally refer to parents as the most likely drivers of improvement in schools. In reality, children and young people are the ultimate 'consumers' of their learning, and school staff are often best placed to pick up and build on the messages they give out.

Our experience is that, when students can articulate what does and does not work for them, and when and when they can think with adults and each other about what is happening, the intelligence generated makes it possible to shape experiences of learning that meet the diverse needs of the whole student population.

For this to happen, staff and students have to feel they can be completely open about what they are experiencing and what they think will make things better. **Antidote's initial research, conducted with the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol, explored the factors that enable a student to say 'I would learn better if...' and a staff member 'I could help students learn even better if...'**

Staff and students told us that they were more likely to feel free and autonomous if they felt capable, listened to, accepted, safe and included (which we have abbreviated to CLASI). These concepts are fully explored in Appendix 1 (pp. 30-32).

People who feel CLASI can talk honestly with one other about their experiences, thoughts and ideas. Knowing that they can get attention for themselves makes it possible for them to take an interest in what other people are experiencing. The understanding that emerges from sharing experiences stimulates deeper thinking about what is happening, and more creative ideas for making things even better.

The impact of feeling CLASI is initially on individuals' confidence to speak up and become engaged with others. 'You should always speak up and be confident to tell what you feel,' said Paul from Year 6 when asked what he had learned from taking part in the PROGRESS Programme. 'Before, I would definitely hold everything inside. But now I know that things will change.'

As more individuals make the same discovery, they influence each other to form a culture where people are continuously identifying issues, tackling problems and finding ways to make things even better.

School leaders will often say their door is 'always open', without having a way of finding out how willing staff and students are to walk through it. And politicians will talk about distributing power without recognising the ways in which they hold on to control. They get away

with it, so far as schools are concerned, because people are so unclear as to why distributing freedom and power across the school community will lead to higher achievement.

Thinking about these things led us to the conclusion that if the PROGRESS Programme was to promote a Freedom Ethos, it needed to be built around:

- ▶ a rigorous system for finding out how far members of the school community currently felt free and powerful – a Freedom Index
- ▶ ways of presenting the information back to the school that compelled attention, however uncomfortable the messages might be for some
- ▶ a clear focus on the link between what people were experiencing and their capacity to teach and learn.

We also knew the process had to be ongoing, with regular trawls for data leading to new insights into what was getting in the way of teaching and learning being as good as it could be, and for ideas that might lead to strategies for making things even better.

The PROGRESS Programme works because it enables staff and students to take on responsibility for improving the school. The commitment shown by leaders to building a Freedom Ethos fosters a can-do culture, where people start to feel in control of their own working, teaching and learning. As a result, Mark Porter Primary School found (p. 21) that a strategy which it had undertaken as a long-term approach to raising achievement actually led to a 23% increase in SATS scores.

The central messages of this report are that:

- ▶ **A commitment to ensuring that people really do have ‘the freedom and power to lift themselves up’ is the necessary cornerstone of any strategy for building a Big Society.**
- ▶ **Improving school performance by stimulating change from within prevents money being wasted on ineffectual strategies and releases value by boosting enthusiasm for teaching and learning.**

2 THE POLITICS OF FREEDOM

In early 2010, the Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families questioned four former secretaries of state on education policy over the past two decades. Gathered were Lord Baker of Dorking, David Blunkett MP, Baroness Morris of Yardley and Charles Clarke MP.¹

They generally agreed with the thought that ‘too many initiatives, too much change, lack of consistency and change of personnel’ had been the ‘core problem’ of education policy during the Labour years.

David Blunkett said, by way of defence, that so much had seemed to need tackling all at once. He also said he was sceptical that the current enthusiasm for devolving power would continue very long. ‘I know we’ll move back again once people have discovered that you do need levers to pull if you want to change what’s happening in the classroom.’ His remarks highlight the perennial tension between politicians talking about the devolution of power and the reality of central control being maintained.

The desire of today’s education ministers to give teachers the freedom to innovate was at times just as strong under Labour. The 2003 document *Excellence and Enjoyment*² said:

Teachers already have great freedoms to exercise their professional judgement about how they teach. But many teachers believe that either the Government, or Ofsted, or the QCA effectively restrict that freedom... A central message of this document is that teachers have the power to decide how they teach, and that the Government supports that.

What prevented at least some teachers from exercising this freedom was fear of the consequences if they failed to deliver the hoped for results quickly enough. It felt safer to follow the recommended route as

¹ www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/422/422.pdf

² *Excellence and Enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools* (Ref: 0377/203) can be downloaded from <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/85063>

if it had been prescribed rather than risk experimentation, and the time it would take to work with the mistakes or triumphs that might follow.

'It is not the local authority that stops schools using the freedoms they have,' said Clarke's predecessor Baroness Morris in the recent debate on the Academies Bill, 'it is fear of the accountability mechanisms.'

Repeatedly, schools and teachers drew the government's attention to the negative impact its strategies were having on teachers' freedom to innovate. This was especially striking when the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee presented evidence that national testing resulted in teachers feeling they were required to 'teach to the test'. The government's response, though, was to insist that there was 'no reason for testing to result in an unbalanced, narrow curriculum or uninspiring teaching.'¹ This refusal to accept the evidence made it impossible even to start a discussion about how things could be changed.

The Select Committee expressed its exasperation by saying that 'the government's statement of what should be happening seemed to us rather out of touch with what appeared to be actually happening in classrooms.'² The climate of denial contributed to teachers and school leaders feeling, by regime end, that they were in thrall to a hyperactive government whose actions they could in no way influence.

It is within this policy context that Antidote developed its PROGRESS Programme. As we developed ways of helping students and staff to deploy whatever 'freedom and power' was available for them to make a difference in their schools, we learned how powerful such work could be in enabling people to develop their capacity to learn, and in making a difference to the bottom line of examination results. We also learned a lot about the conditions that need to be in place if people are to grow sufficiently in confidence to exercise their power to create change, and the many ways in which such growth can be sabotaged.

1 www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmchilsch/1003/1003.pdf

2 www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmchilsch/169/169.pdf

3 THE CHALLENGE OF FREEDOM

The coalition government refers often to 'freedom'. It has a vision of the Big Society as one where individuals will 'feel free and powerful enough to help themselves'. It is also taking forward plans for raising educational achievement by ensuring that schools enjoy 'a greater degree of autonomy and freedom'.

This attachment to the idea of freedom reflects a view that people and organisations are more likely to come up with, and implement, innovative ways of making things work better, when they experience:

- ▶ less constraint from government requirements (e.g. to follow a national curriculum in schools)
- ▶ more opportunities to take a lead (e.g. setting up new schools)
- ▶ more occasions when they can influence the decisions that affect their lives.

Antidote knows from its work with over 50 schools, that there is indeed a link between freedom and school improvement. However, **the sort of freedom that we refer to involves providing everyone, including students, teachers and other staff, with substantial, ongoing opportunities to exercise a measure of freedom and power.**

What New Labour lacked is still missing now: an understanding of the sort of freedom that will generate school improvement. Without such an understanding, any strategy is going to be hit and miss. Just removing constraints and providing new opportunities is not enough to ensure that people have 'the tools to lift themselves up and make their most of their lives'.¹

Schools are complex organisations, where many different elements interact with each other to shape the culture. It is easy in such circumstances for people to mis-identify the cause of the issues they are seeking to address, as demonstrated by Peter Pike School:

1 The 'Big Society' Speech by the Prime Minister which he delivered on the 19th July 2010 can be downloaded from <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572>

CASE STUDY 1: Peter Pike School:*The teachers who couldn't agree on what 'good teaching' meant*

Despite a caring senior team and staff group, chaos was never far from the surface at Peter Pike Primary School. There always seemed to be students wandering the corridors, as if their classrooms could not hold them.

The headteacher sometimes provoked resentment by suggesting that this was the result of teachers lacking the class management skills needed to keep children under control. Another explanation emerged from the consultation with Antidote.

It transpired that the school was confused about its approach to teaching and learning. Most days, the headteacher was focused on ensuring that children were having a rich and diverse experience in the classroom. However, a censorial visit from the local authority could get her totally focused on targets and levels of attainment. The staff didn't know which approach they were working to on any single day. This led to feelings of being undervalued, followed by resentment and resistance to the headteacher's ideas and changes.

The headteacher found it helpful to hear the perceptions of the staff, but the real revelation – to the teachers as well – was about how this confusion percolated through to the students. The less resilient found shifting values, aims and objectives unbearable, which is why they took to their heels and avoided classrooms.

With this insight to work from, the staff explored how they could address the confusion and so make the classroom experience stimulating and engaging for all children.

Giving teachers, other staff and students the power and freedom to contribute to a deep understanding of what is going on increases the organisation's intelligence about itself. This is key to ensuring that the strategies put in place to make things even better will:

- ▶ get to the heart of the issues that need addressing

- ▶ draw productively on the resources available within the organisation
- ▶ set in motion cycles of change that have the capacity to generate sustainable ongoing improvement

Without a wide distribution of freedom and power, enormous sums will go on being wasted on implementing solutions that are ineffective because the cause of the problem has not been properly understood.

As Rosie, an assistant headteacher, said to us after doing the PROGRESS Programme:

'We might have gone off on tangents which would have been totally useless and missed out on areas that were very important. We felt that communication within the school was very good because we tell them everything. But unfortunately they hadn't heard what we were telling them. We could have gone on quite happily believing that we were communicating, but we were not. Without that discovery, we wouldn't have made any progress at all. The good things that have come about wouldn't have come about if we had just gone along each assuming that we understood where the other was coming from.'

The strategies currently being adopted by government for schools will indeed give more freedom to some headteachers and some teachers. This, though, will not deliver the goal being sought: a real step change in achievement by children and young people. Such a shift can only come about from allowing greater engagement throughout the system. This will contribute to the Big Society.

Giving people freedom and power takes them on a journey from feeling powerless to bring about change – and therefore more likely to feel disaffected, demoralized or disengaged – to feeling that they have 'the tools to lift themselves up'. This profound shift in how they perceive their own capabilities leads to changing attitudes not only to the processes of teaching and learning, but also to their capacity to bring about change more broadly.

The experience of Mildmarsh School shows how a group of staff moved from a cynical position where they opposed the headteacher at every turn, to one where everyone was working together. It is a story of how a better appreciation of the impact of their own actions led people to the discovery that it was in their power to make their own lives better. Andrea, the headteacher, described this to us as a journey from 'me' to 'we', from framing issues in terms of 'they' to considering what 'we' might do about it.

CASE STUDY 2: Mildmarsh School: *The Journey from 'Me' to 'We'*

The staff at Mildmarsh School were feeling sullen and resentful. Resenting the change in working practices that a new headteacher had introduced, they responded to any request she made of them – whether to observe a class, attend a meeting or do some planning – with expressions of discontent. When asked to think about how to make things better, they would loudly insist that the headteacher was the problem and she should go. It would have been easy to conclude that the situation was incapable of any remedy that did not involve at least one redundancy.

But when the full staff group had their negative feelings played back to them, the experience upset these assumptions. They saw how differently they were behaving from the way they thought of themselves – as a group of caring people who wanted the best for the school and the children in their charge. They became aware of their own role in creating the working dynamic that they hated, and began to see how their own unpleasantness was leading to fractious relationships between children in the playground. They not only saw that they had the opportunity to improve their working lives, they recognised the personal and organisational need for them to do so.

The tensions within the wider staff body were played out in a strategy group made up of teachers and support staff. At first, members were reluctant to think positively about how to make

things better. One individual said it was impossible to say anything positive in a culture where the prevailing attitudes were so negative. A lot of time was spent on enabling the group to get to know each other better and build trust. This internal work of building confidence had to take place before anything positive could happen. The practice of blaming the head was too entrenched for it to be easily shifted. But once they understood the influence they could have, the strategy group members started to promote the same process in the wider staff group.

The strategy group instigated ways for all staff to notice and appreciate each other. They listened to the views of the mid-day supervisors about children's behaviour, and approached the senior team with a proposal to split the playtimes by key stage. When the initial strategies were well received and started to have an impact, the group became more confident in their own ability to create change. And from this flowed a new kind of trust between all members of staff.

Over time, the staff as a group have taken ownership of how they can change the dynamic of the school so as to better support children's learning. They continue to meet, with different people taking turns to make change happen for the common good. The result is sustainable change that reaches far beyond a single initiative or simple 'fix-it'. It is change that gets to the core and fabric of school life, leading to a much better experience for all the children in the school.

4 THE FREEDOM PROCESS

To develop people's freedom and power, schools need to put in place an open Freedom Process that give every individual the opportunity to:

- ▶ describe how they currently experience teaching and learning
- ▶ reflect with others about how their experience emerges from the way things are organised
- ▶ contribute ideas for a strategy that will make things even better.

A Freedom Process gives everyone the opportunity to describe their experience as it actually is for them; then brings this information back into the school community so that others can reflect upon it, play a part in elaborating a deeper understanding of what is going on and propose ideas for changing the things that people agree need changing.

It is because everyone has a role in informing and shaping this process that it leads to powerful strategies for improving schools.

Our experience of developing the PROGRESS Programme is that seven elements make an open consultation process effective:

- ▶ *A structured online survey* containing questions that are open enough to allow people to report on how their experience of school affects their capacity to teach and learn, but at the same time systematic enough for the answers to be presented as graphs and tables so that one school can be compared to other schools; the same school can be compared to itself through time, and different groups in one school can be compared to each other
- ▶ *Additional online opportunities* for people to describe in more detail the factors which shape that experience as they absorb and build on information from previous surveys
- ▶ *Sufficient guarantee of anonymity* that people are willing to confide their true thoughts and feelings without any fear that they are going to be judged or will face any other form of comeback
- ▶ *Opportunities for conversations* that allow staff and students to reflect on how their own experience compares to that of others, in the process generating understanding and ideas
- ▶ *Lead groups of staff and students* to take responsibility for organising these conversations, channelling people's ideas as they emerge and keeping the conversations going so as to ensure that the final strategies have broad buy-in and are refined through time
- ▶ *An ongoing record of the emerging data, deliberations and strategies* so that people can review the school's journey, whether as

previous participants in the conversation, or new entrants

- ▶ *Skilled facilitation* to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to become engaged, no viewpoints are pushed under the carpet and everyone stays focused on what is really going on.

Such an open process differs fundamentally from the more closed consultation processes commonly used in schools. For the most part, these ask people to:

- ▶ indicate to what extent they had a particular experience, of bullying for example, rather than to describe what it is they have actually experienced
- ▶ suggest what would make things better, before there is any agreement on what needs to change
- ▶ indicate their approval or disapproval of some pre-determined measure for making the school better.

The closed nature of such consultation processes has two consequences:

- ▶ It communicates to staff and students that the school thinks it does not need to know about their actual perceptions or ideas. This risks communicating to people that they are powerless, and that there is little point in them thinking for themselves about what needs to change
- ▶ It cuts leaders off from the deeper insights that are available about what is happening in their schools – where rumbles of discontent may be starting to emerge, for example – and creative thinking about how things might be made even better. **Operating with only a shallow knowledge of their own organisation, school leaders find it more difficult to shape strategies that will improve things.**

To give a feel for how an open consultation process works, we describe below what happened at a large secondary school, with over 1000 students from a large number of different ethnic groups. The school has recently been judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted:

CASE STUDY 3: Bortham Community School:
Where their commitment was taken as indicating staff did not care

The initial survey at Bortham Community School revealed a place where both staff and students enjoyed being part of an innovative, creative and dynamic school. Young people valued the opportunities and experiences they were offered. Staff relished being at the 'cutting edge' of new developments in education. The senior team invited and embraced new initiatives, rarely saying 'no' to any project on offer. The result was a school that performed well and 'buzzed' with vibrant activity.

But there was another side to this picture that was explored more fully in a follow-up survey. Adults reported that they felt highly stressed. They didn't feel they had time to reflect. They were starting to feel depressed rather than energised by the challenges of working in the school. As for the students, their response to teachers being busy and distracted was to conclude that their views and opinions were not valued, that adults cared more about their teaching than about students learning.

The picture that was constructed from all the data we had collected up to that point showed how staff and students had become locked into a self-defeating cycle. Students were starting to behave badly in response to their feeling that the school did not care about them. In response, staff would put aside their more innovative ideas and adopt more didactic teaching styles. To the well-established frustration of the better-behaved students at the way their more turbulent peers received so much attention was then added resentment at the loss of opportunities for enjoyable learning.

The staff were initially shocked by the picture that was laid before them. How could the students interpret their dedication and hard work as representing a lack of interest and care? But once they had accepted that this was how they were perceived, they started to set in place processes for monitoring the impact of change on individuals and groups while re-affirming their commitment to innovation, creativity and professional development.

Changes to meeting schedules and the timing of the school day meant that, fairly quickly, the school became a calmer and more focused place. Time spent on building stronger relationships contributed to staff becoming more open and fair in their dealings with young people, ensuring that the latter felt sufficiently listened to that they could get on with using the opportunities available to them. Among the innovations that came from students was a system for lesson observation that provided feedback to their teachers on factors such as the level of student interest and involvement, pace, variety of activities and inclusion of different learning styles.

Two years after Antidote started working with this school, Ofsted said in their letter to students: 'It is a very happy and special place because of the exceptional care and support that it provides and the opportunities for everyone to have an equal chance to learn and achieve. We were very impressed with the respect that you show each other and your excellent behaviour. You get on very well with all the teachers and the adults who support you which helps you to make good progress and achieve good results in examinations.'

5 FINDING SOLUTIONS

If schools are to develop strategies that work, they need to identify what will make a difference to the interactions between the individuals who teach or learn there. For that to happen, two things need to be in place.

The first is access to rich information about other people's experiments in teaching and learning, with good evidence of what worked, where it worked and why it worked. As the Cambridge Review of Primary Education has strongly argued, if teachers are to take back control of pedagogy from 'bland and pre-packaged government-approved lessons', they need to be held accountable to evidence so that

they can justify the decisions they make and go on to teach children as well to think for themselves.¹

The other essential forms the heart of this report: having a systematic process for discovering from all staff and students what it is that currently makes teaching and learning strong, and what makes it less strong; then engaging them all in open, curiosity-driven conversations that result in creative, congruent solutions that address the issues people have identified.

Bringing these elements together is powerful because:

- ▶ the most creative and effective strategies will emerge when the people formulating them have properly understood the complexity of the situation they are trying to influence, and are willing to grapple with that complexity
- ▶ people find it easier to implement effectively a strategy when it feels sufficiently congruent with their beliefs about what will work
- ▶ people are more likely to buy in to the strategies put in place when they had a role to play in shaping them.

The story of Mark Porter Primary School illustrates how staff and student creativity can deliver improved strategies for teaching and learning, leading to higher levels of academic achievement. The school started from an experience of having approaches to improving teaching, learning and behaviour foisted upon them without sufficient attention to their appropriateness, or the impact they might have on staff and students.

CASE STUDY 4: Mark Porter Primary School: *Raising SATS scores by generating enthusiasm for learning*

Mark Porter Primary School is set in an area of high economic deprivation, with a very mobile student population. It was never going to be easy getting SATS results up to the national norms, despite the pressure to do so and the resources expended on making this possible.

Participation in the PROGRESS Programme gave staff and students the freedom to explore the pressure they were under to improve results and the impact this had on teaching and learning.

Gradually, they began to recognise how the 'fix-it' solutions they had adopted to achieve better results got in the way of staff developing longer-term strategies that would enable their children to grow, learn and develop. They felt forced to adopt teaching and learning techniques that were less satisfying and ultimately less effective. This in turn increased the sense of stress and unhappiness. Staff sickness was high, leading to disrupted relationships between teachers and children. Many children found these disruptions hard to tolerate and the teachers' lack of confidence in the approaches had a knock-on effect on children's confidence.

As these findings were brought out and explored, staff and students started to talk together about what made for a good learning experience. Staff recognised that making lessons more interesting would build their confidence. As they talked, they began to form a resolution to break the cycle and to concentrate on creating learning experiences that would get people engaged. As staff efficacy and confidence built, so did the confidence of the children.

The irony was that, in this school, the result of these 'longer-term' approaches to raising achievement was an immediate improvement in SATS results. The number of children achieving Level 4 in English rose from 61% to 84%, Reading rose from 66% to 86%, Writing rose from 53% to 76%, Maths rose from 69% to 76% and Science rose from 73% to 81%.

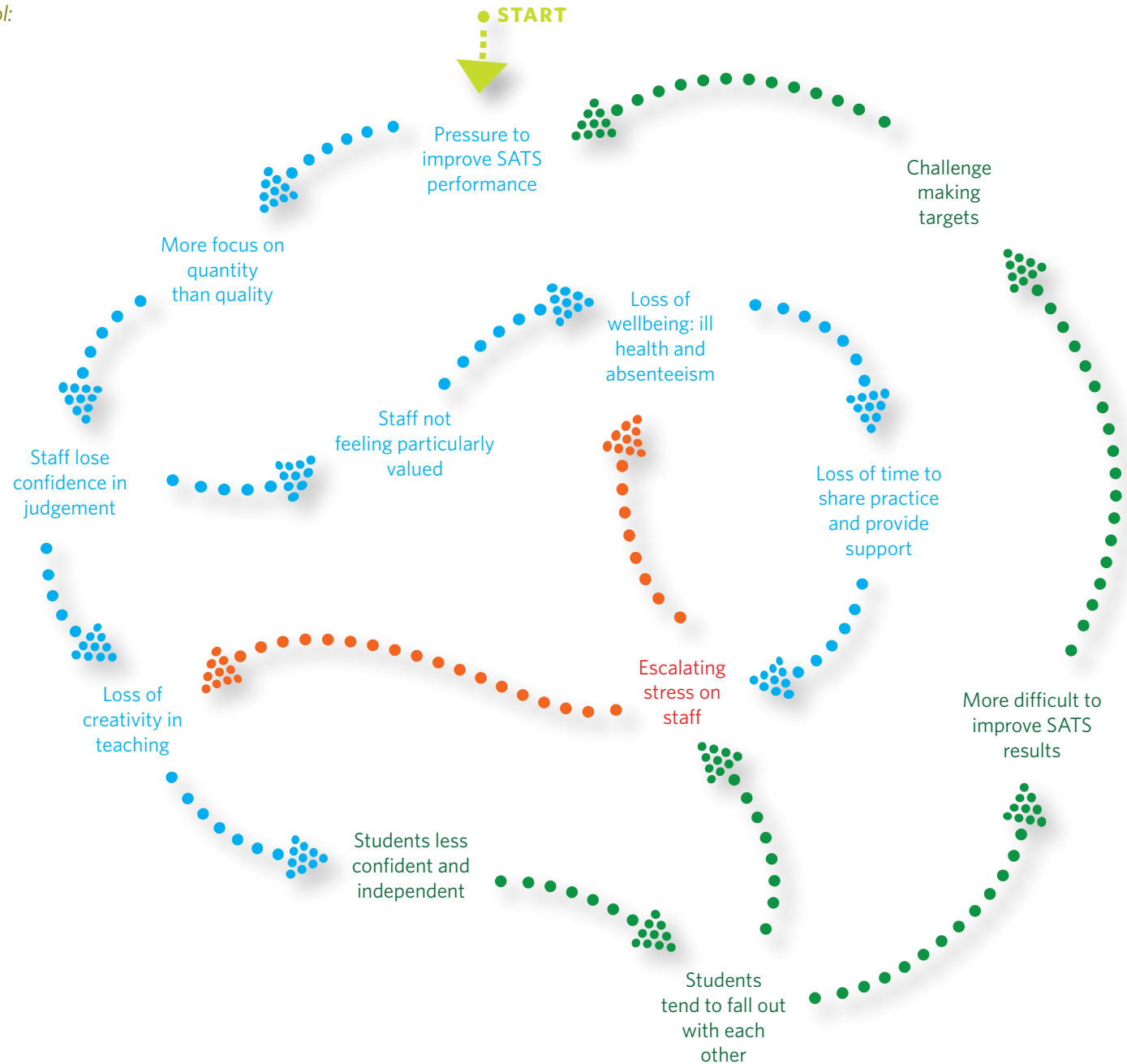
¹ Policy Priorities for Primary Education can be downloaded from <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/Downloads/PolicyPriorities.pdf>

How SATS improved at Mark Porter Primary School:
THE ANALYSIS

In this school, we put together data from the two Environment for Learning Surveys (Baseline and Follow-on) to construct a picture of what was happening.

This showed how the pressure to improve SATS results made it more difficult to do so because of the way this pressure was experienced as generating stress, and reducing confidence and creativity. As students became less confident, they performed less well and fell out with each other.

The picture illustrated how the situation reinforced itself, with stress leading to levels of ill-health, absenteeism and low performance that made it impossible to achieve the targets being set, thus increasing the pressure further.

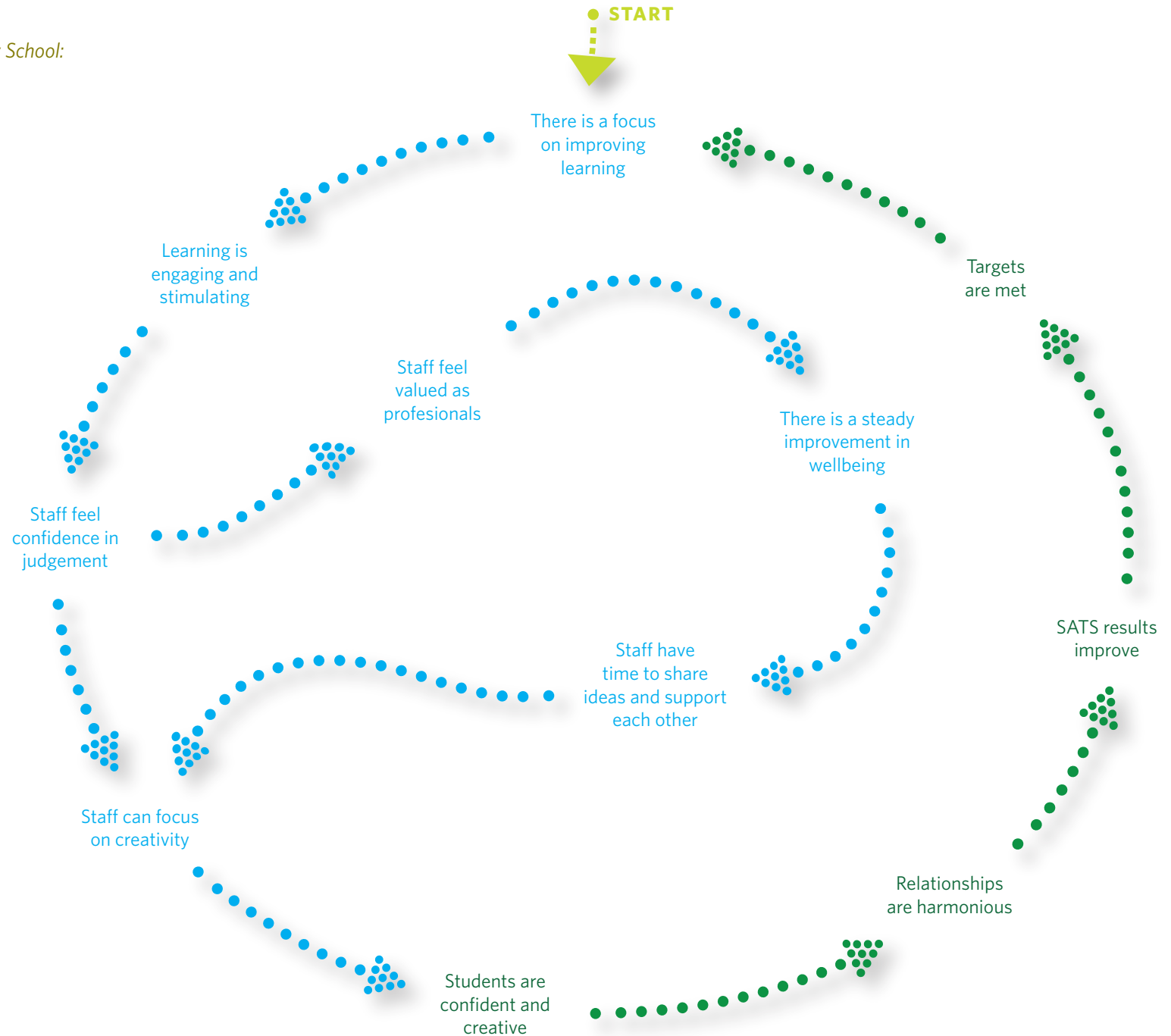


How SATs improved at Mark Porter Primary School:
THE OUTLINE STRATEGY

The revised picture showed how a renewed focus on the quality of the teaching and learning experience, and on staff's confidence in their own judgement would lead to a positive cycle of engaged students and healthy staff bringing about increased results.

For each of the topics, staff and students came up with ideas that were drawn on for the final strategy.

So, for example, it was agreed by both strategy groups that staff would have more professional confidence if they had permission to: go with a topic if it took longer than planned; repeat learning so as to consolidate it, rather than rushing on; adapt the planning in response to communications from children.



6 OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Our report has recommendations for all those who influence schools: school leaders, policymakers and school inspectors.

SCHOOL LEADERS

The approach we have been advocating in this report does not constrain the authority of headteachers. As the leaders of their schools, heads are responsible for determining the direction of travel. They must approve policies, allocate resources and establish the curriculum. But they can only do that effectively if they allow themselves to be influenced by others' views and experiences.

We have learned over the years that this is a hard thing for leaders to do. The first reason for this is that **they generally do not like to acknowledge the possibility that the school in their own head is not the school that is out there**. While it is self-evident that even the most dynamic, accessible and empathetic leader cannot know how the school is experienced by every member of it, many still find it distressing to discover that there is discontent of which they are not aware and reasons for teaching and learning not being as good as it might be that they had not previously appreciated.

The other reason is that **headteachers can fear the strategies which emerge from discussions between staff and students will be at odds with their personal vision for the school**. Their worry is that they will end up being forced to choose between disappointing the school community or doing things that they do not believe in. Our experience in delivering the PROGRESS Programme is that staff and student groups are quite capable of treating the headteacher's vision as a non-negotiable, and coming up with strategies for realising that vision. When headteachers are truly open and ready to take on board the ideas that are on offer, their school and their authority are strengthened.

WE RECOMMEND THAT SCHOOL LEADERS:

- ▶ monitor the degree to which students, teachers and other staff experience themselves as having freedom and power
- ▶ set up processes for enabling knowledge to come from within
- ▶ ensure they have the support they need if they are to remain open and non-defensive in the face of information emerging about aspects of the school that are less strong than they would like them to be, or thought that they were.

SCHOOL INSPECTORS

The principle behind the accountability system operated by Ofsted for the past 18 years is a good one: that parents and other stakeholders should have access to an objective account of how effectively schools are meeting the needs of children and young people. The way the principle has been executed, however, has been damaging to professional confidence and creativity.

At the heart of Ofsted's work is the issuing of judgements, to which schools respond with sighs of relief when they are good, and sinking spirits when they are bad. To form its judgements, Ofsted has developed its own assumptions about what determines whether teaching is 'good' or 'outstanding', and whether schools are 'well led'. For staff at schools trying to avoid a 'category', anticipating what those assumptions are can become a higher priority than following their own professional judgement about what will deliver the best outcomes, and taking the risks that innovation necessarily entails. And trying to follow the inspectors' prescription for improvement has a tendency to produce the sort of undesirable consequences that Hinksey Junior School experienced (p. 32).

This is not a big constraint perhaps for a school that works with well-motivated students who deliver high levels of academic achievement. But for schools where students' motivation to learn needs to be carefully fostered through innovative practices that are responsive to the needs of individuals, it has been an enormous constraint.

Where schools are struggling to improve their results, leaders are often deterred from implementing processes that give people freedom and influence. The pressure they are under to be seen steadily progressing to higher levels of achievement, means they feel the need to exercise a strong hold on school leadership, and this does not allow them the space to give staff or students a full voice. And yet it is particularly in such schools that the experience of finding a voice can be so transformative, for staff as well as students.

An enabling inspection system, by contrast, would start by celebrating what is good in a school, then try to understand what was less good, and find ways of communicating this information to stakeholders in ways that inspired them to make a positive contribution to the school's efforts to become even better.

WE RECOMMEND THAT INSPECTORS:

- ▶ actively set out to identify and celebrate the strengths in each school
- ▶ take as much interest in why schools do things the way they do as in what they do
- ▶ set up processes for sharing information about a school's strengths with other schools, and for linking schools that are trying to do similar things.

POLICYMAKERS

If inspectors have an unpredictable impact on a system they cannot be expected to understand, they have at least spent some time trying to find out what is going on in each school. Policymakers must necessarily operate at one remove: visiting schools for brief periods of time and having conversations with the directors of professional organisations or think tanks as they search for the big ideas that will bring about the changes that they seek.

The central message of this report is that, in schools as in other organisations, change needs to come from within, from an appreciation

of what is happening, from serious thinking about what will make things even better. **Policymakers, therefore, need to find a way of staying true to their intention to 'free' schools. That means resisting the urge to express their impatience at the slow pace of change by pulling on the levers of power. Only by holding back can they hope to achieve a step change in academic achievement.**

And if we are to see the emergence of The Big Society, policies on schools need to be linked to a broader commitment to a Freedom Ethos. Policymakers have to learn to demonstrate that they are genuinely open to all the information that is out there about the situation on which they are trying to have an impact. This includes showing they are genuinely interested in the impact their own policies and statements are having on people's freedom and power, even when that impact is negative, and the findings challenge their core beliefs.

WE RECOMMEND THAT POLICYMAKERS:

- ▶ are explicit about the forms of freedom that promote achievement and why they do so
- ▶ monitor the level of freedom and power experienced by individuals in schools (and other organisations), and the role of government policies, strategies and statements in enlarging or reducing people's sense of having freedom and power
- ▶ explore ways of assessing how much money could be saved and value created by using the intelligence within organisations about what strategies will work to raise achievement.

APPENDIX 1: HOW ANTIDOTE WORKS

The PROGRESS Programme involves all staff and students in making their school great. It helps schools improve by engaging the **whole** school community in developing a deep understanding of what is happening that needs to change, and then in drawing out people's creative ideas for bringing about that change.

All members of the school community complete an online Environment for Learning Survey (ELS) to find out how far they experience themselves as **C**apable, **L**istened to, **A**ccepted, **S**afe and **I**ncluded (CLAS1).

CAPABLE

I feel capable when the feedback I receive communicates that other people are genuinely interested in my becoming the best I can be. In these circumstances, I know that I can own up to mistakes without being afraid that I will be belittled, undermined or made to feel ashamed. Even when I am struggling or have experienced a setback, people will remind me of my capacity to achieve. Things are organised in a way that enables me to complete tasks without undue stress, and to find the resources I need to be successful.

LISTENED TO

I feel listened to when I know there is a possibility that what I say might lead to things changing for the better. There are systems in place that not only give me a chance to air my views, but also foster my confidence that those views are being taken on board. Every voice is heard, and what is said can be reflected upon. It is possible for ideas that change the way things are done to come from the youngest student and the most junior member of staff. It is worth my while thinking about what will make things better because something may happen as a result.

ACCEPTED

I feel accepted when I know that I can be true to myself. I do not need to hide behind masks and roles. I can take the risk of thinking creatively and putting forward my own ideas, because I know that people will treat those ideas with respect even if their first response is that they are crazy. I can try out different ways of being myself, and this makes it possible for me to change. No one has to be stuck with a label that has been attached to them - the 'challenging' or 'gifted' student; the 'enthusiastic' or 'cynical' member of staff; the class that is a 'joy to teach' or the 'students from hell'.

SAFE

Before I can feel powerful and free, I need to feel safe. Feeling safe enables me to articulate a viewpoint that is different from that of those holding positions of power. When I am challenged, I can engage because I do not feel the need to fight back. As I do not have to be always looking out for myself, I can collaborate with others and work to make things better for everyone.

INCLUDED

Where people see me as making a distinctive, and therefore valuable, contribution to the community, I can be bold in saying how I see things. My perspective is valued, as is everybody else's, for its potential to illuminate an aspect of this organisation, to show how it can become the best it possibly can be.

Results from the initial ELS Baseline Survey, and from the tailored ELS Follow-on Survey that is shaped out of its findings, inform a conversation across the whole school community to see what is getting in the way of teaching and learning being as good as it can be, and what ideas people have for making it even better. The results

can be transformational. For example, in one school results rose by 25% because they found a way of making lessons more exciting and engaging.

The PROGRESS Programme demonstrates that schools improve when:

- ▶ the whole school community works together on identifying issues and evolving solutions
- ▶ staff and students are enabled to feel good about what they already do well and to explore what may stand in the way of excellence
- ▶ external pressures are managed in ways that strengthen people's capacity to think, learn and work together
- ▶ conflicting perspectives can be heard, understood and taken into account.

APPENDIX 2: ADDITIONAL CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY 5: Hinksey Junior School:

Improving teaching and behaviour by generating a sense of purpose

Ofsted inspectors had identified inconsistent teaching and weaknesses in behaviour management at Hinksey Junior School. They had proposed strategies for improving teachers' planning, so that all students were being stretched by their lessons, and had provided pointers to higher expectations of student behaviour.

One year later, teaching that the inspectors rated 'unsatisfactory' was considered 'good' and children's behaviour was generally excellent. Could this improvement be linked to the wake-up call from Ofsted and the consequent application of tighter controls? Was this a case where people could talk about the school's success in 'dealing' with bad teachers or 'zero tolerance' of poor behaviour?

In reality, the story told by the people inside the school was of a steep downwards spiral following the inspectors' visit. As the senior team started closely monitoring those members of staff who had been identified as 'weak', they found they were causing *all* staff, no matter what their skill and expertise, to feel they had been judged as somehow inadequate. This resulted in anxiety that soaked up emotional energy. People became suspicious of one another, were disinclined to work collaboratively and were forever watching their backs. Senior staff rapidly became 'them', seen as separate from 'us' and viewed with wary uncertainty. Teachers reported finding lessons observations to be 'judgemental and unhelpful for professional development'.

This shift in staff morale did not go unnoticed by the children. They felt that teachers were now 'looking through' them, where before they paid attention to their needs. Recognising that teachers were stressed and too busy to make time for them, they started to feel less 'real' and became, as a result, both less engaged in learning and less willing to behave.

The improvement in the quality of teaching and in children's behaviour were actually by-products of the headteacher abandoning the Ofsted script and engaging Antidote to work with her on creating a dynamic learning environment that met the needs of adults and children alike. In Hinksey, particular attention was paid to communication, both formal and informal, professional relationships, overall ethos, classrooms, the informal places and spaces of the school and the support provided for different roles. The school ended up with a rich, textured picture of what was going on in the day to day experience of staff and children alike. It had a clear idea of what was working well and some insights into the unhelpful dynamics. The school could also identify the damaging impact that the measures put in place on Ofsted's recommendation were having on both children and adults.

The data provided the insights needed to bring the school staff and students together to address their common experiences. The very act of hearing people's perceptions, whether they were negative or positive, provided its own catharsis and started the process of releasing creative energy to find solutions.

Data enabled each section of the school to know what it felt like to be in another role, phase, or geographical area of the school. Teaching assistants began to understand the pressures experienced by teachers while teachers realised how frustrating it was for teaching assistants when they were asked to do work without knowing the bigger picture or receiving any feedback on whether or not they were doing a good job. The office staff became more connected to other school staff and senior team gained new insights. Knowing what was happening for other people fuelled curiosity and conversations that led to increased understanding. 'People got to know each other much better', the headteacher said.

Armed with this understanding, staff began to accept the support they were being offered by senior management. The anxieties that had divided them began to dissolve, leaving teachers and teaching assistants freer to share ideas and provide supportive challenge to each other. And through their participation in the conversation, students came to appreciate how staff were trying to do the best for them.

Conversations took place in every classroom as the school council shared the student data with the rest of the school. The level of teacher curiosity about their perceptions enabled students to feel again that they could speak in a real way to their teachers. They began to talk about what they wanted the school to do for them, and how they wanted the school to be. Stress was reduced and the atmosphere became calmer. In short, the process reconnected the staff with their core values. It tapped in to a history of working together as an approachable, supportive and caring staff team who liked to exchange ideas and wanted to create a calm, purposeful and happy atmosphere that supported children's learning.

CASE STUDY 6: Toby Rutter's Grammar School: *Finding an innovative approach to reconciling disaffected students*

Toby Rutter's Grammar School is a long-established institution accustomed to getting excellent examination results and being judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted. Staff enjoy a high degree of autonomy, strong support from the senior team and a generally good working environment.

In this context, there was widespread resistance to thinking about the reasons why student behaviour had started to become somewhat more challenging. The prevailing view was that such behaviour should simply be quelled and that a 'good' teacher was one who would do so. Members of staff who did encounter difficulties would not mention them for fear of being branded incompetent. This reduced the opportunities for staff to get support from others, and to develop consistent shared responses to student misbehaviour.

Young people had picked up from staff the idea that the best way of dealing with things was to 'put up and shut up'. Those who had personal issues relating to home or work felt that they had nobody to talk with. They felt distant from adults in the school and, though that worked for many, it didn't work for all.

When the staff and students who had felt unable to speak and challenge the prevailing assumptions in the school eventually found their voice, the rest of the community were very reluctant to listen. But once they did, all joined in the creative task of developing shared understandings.

Staff and students met together to identify the characteristics of good staff-student relationships. Impressed by the similarity of their lists, they went on to develop an innovative way of opening up a dialogue between staff and students when behaviour or learning was not going well. That has led all staff to make changes in their teaching styles, with more attention paid to student needs. With the frustration experienced by some students now assuaged, everyone started to feel they were going in the same direction.

CASE STUDY 7: Dove Primary School:
The support staff who knew the answer

An Antidote survey carried out at Dove Primary revealed that girls were having a significantly less positive experience than boys. In exploratory sessions with the children, we uncovered the extent of the disconnection between boys and girls.

The boys – many of whom were Pakistani – wanted to see boys taught separately from girls with different classes and lessons. The girls were indignant about the whole issue, feeling put down and unappreciated by their male peers.

When these ideas were discussed among the staff, it was the teaching assistants who had the most useful insights on how the children's attitudes reflected parental attitudes in the wider community. The teaching assistants hadn't come forward with ideas earlier because they came from the same Pakistani community as the children and were caught in the same dynamic. They were not used to being consulted on these sorts of issues.

It was clear that the way forward was to talk with the parents about the attitudes held by boys and girls, but the school had never in the past been able to get parents to come into the school for either parent consultation or information-giving evenings.

Again, the Asian teaching assistants provided the key. They suggested holding a Meena Bazaar similar to the kind of event held by schools in Pakistan. They said that parents wouldn't come into school for a formal meeting but they would attend a community-feel bazaar.

Once relationships were established informally, it was much easier to engage the parents in the more formal meetings about school culture.

CASE STUDY 8: Lucius Community School
The students who really did want to learn

Lucius Community School had a group of year 9 students with a reputation for being exhausting and unmanageable – uninterested in listening to their teachers or each other.

The students and their teachers went away for a day to look at the issues behind this behaviour that had blocked their learning for over two years.

What emerged was that their tutor had gone off long-term sick in the first few weeks of their time in secondary school. As a result, the young people had been exposed to a succession of supply teachers and had concluded that nobody cared about them. Their response was to mirror the perceived lack of care and to switch off involvement with the school and learning.

The teachers used this information in their work with the class over the following term. They now had a framework in which to talk about what might be happening when concentration seemed to slip.

The result was a significant shift in the young people's behaviour and enormously accelerated progress in their learning. Their Year 11 was to secure level of A* – C grades that were 12% higher than the three previous years.

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Set up in 1997, **ANTIDOTE** supports schools in creating the best possible opportunities for children and young people to learn, grow and achieve. Its PROGRESS Programme is a way of giving students, teachers and other staff the power and freedom to make their schools even better.

Freeing Schools: Shaping the Big Society, looks at how the wide distribution of freedom and power can raise academic standards and help deliver the Big Society. It questions the extent to which the measures currently being proposed for giving freedom to schools will achieve these aims.



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