

## Report on Sabbatical 1 March to 24 May 2010

The purpose of my sabbatical was to look at examples of good practice in schools particularly focussing on leadership, literacy and raising achievement. Some of the nine schools I visited provided useful insights into all three foci whereas others were specific to one particular focus.

**Friday March 5, 2010**

**Keda Cowling and 'Toe by Toe'**



### **Baildon Yorkshire**

Toe by Toe is a programme designed by Keda Cowling to assist the dyslexic, as well as students who experience difficulties in learning to read for a variety of reasons. It has gained an international reputation and I was interested to find out about how it works and the philosophy behind it.

Keda was born in 1926 and was a bright child at school however the prevailing economic circumstances of the time meant that she was unable to continue her secondary education and began working in a nearby textile mill. During the war she was put to work in a munitions factory.

When the war ended opportunities opened up and Keda completed her education and enrolled in a teachers college. Her early life experiences gave her a great affinity for the

underdog.

Keda's husband built a house for the family in Baildon next door to school and as Keda was unable to drive it seemed to her to be a good idea to teach at the next-door school. The school had a vacancy for a teacher of second years, which Keda accepted although she had never taught this age group before. The numbers of children who could not yet read, and despite her best efforts could not grasp the concepts, struck Keda. Anecdotal evidence, which Keda did not accept, was that some particular families were unintelligent and had been for generations. Keda began to suspect that something else was involved here and came up with the concept of dyslexia, recognising that this was a hereditary condition.

Keda thought day and night of strategies which she could bring to bear on the problem. Eventually she set up a group of students that she would work intensively with, according to

the strategies she had devised, and also a 'control' group with whom she would use the tried and true methods.

As she progressed she constantly reviewed and revised her approaches with the students and began to experience success with hitherto unsuccessful readers. It became apparent that daily repetition of drills where the 'tutor' and the student worked together was producing promising results. The work covered at school can be reinforced at home. Each 'drill' must have 3 successful repetitions before it is considered to be mastered. The success that students experience builds confidence and increases their desire to progress further, bearing in mind that these are often students who have experienced little success at school and may in fact have ideas of educational failure reinforced at home. The programme is highly structured and has been refined by trial and error from 25 years work in the classroom.

English is a particularly difficult language to learn to read as it contains 44 phonemes and 1120 graphemes compared to Finnish, which has 23 of each. Keda has identified the 300 most commonly used words in English, which make up 75% of what we read and write. She has identified and codified the rules which govern English pronunciation e.g.

Identifying that if a 'g' is followed by an 'e' an 'i' or a 'y' then the 'g' is pronounced as a soft 'g' as in giraffe.

If the 'g' is followed by an 'a', an 'o' or a 'u' then the 'g' is pronounced as a hard 'g' as in goat. The same rule applies to 'c'.

For students who have an aptitude for reading, these rules do not have to be learnt and in fact the student may be surprised to discover that there are 'rules' which govern pronunciation in this way.

Other 'rules' for students to learn are 'When two vowels go walking, the first one does talking' or the 'magic e' rule being, the 'e' at the end of a word if separated from a vowel by one consonant will change from a short vowel to a long one.

Keda has also devised her own way of breaking words into consonants. She believes the division should be vowel+consonant/

Although you never just leave one letter hanging at the end of a word and doubled consonants also stay together on one side of the division. Interestingly when sounding out really difficult polysyllabic words, Keda believes that you should begin with the syllables at the end of the word and gradually pronouncing more and more of the syllables until you can say the whole word.

Keda is insistent that students begin at the beginning of 'Toe by Toe' and that the learning isn't as effective if the student skips pages or does not begin at the beginning of the course. She admits that such a thick book can seem daunting to a student who is unused to dealing with books but believes that a real sense of accomplishment can be gained by putting a rubber band around completed pages so that students can see themselves making progress.

There has apparently been some criticism of the use of nonsense words. Keda believes strongly that they serve an important role as they provide an important test as to whether the student really has grasped the fundamentals of phonics, as if usual English words were used you could not be as sure, as non-readers will have acquired skills of bluffing and guessing. 'Toe by Toe' is now used in a huge number of countries around the world and Keda had some impressive testimonials from people testifying to its efficacy.



**Monday 8 March, 2010**

**Fairfield High School for Girls**

**Droylsden**

**Manchester**

**Head Teacher: Mr John Hedley**

Fairfield High School is a foundation school, which has science as their specialism. By city standards it is not particularly large at 960 students.

The school has an interesting history being over 200 years old and owes its' existence to the Moravian Church. The Moravians who originated from what is now the Czech Republic believed it was their Christian duty to educate the young and so built schools for both boys and girls. It has existed in its current form since 1974. Although the Head of the school is male, he is very aware of the need to promote the role of women in society and the day I visited there was a year 7 assembly around the theme of International Women's Day. The school strongly resources programmes for students with literacy and numeracy deficits. The school is strongly committed to continuous improvement and uses 'the pupil voice' frequently through the use of both pupil questionnaires and interviews. Questions were not particularly difficult for the students to respond to and used questions like

'What do I do that helps you learn?'

'What should I do more of?'

'What should I do less of?'

The Assistant principal particularly recommended

**Formative Assessment in Action – weaving the threads together**

**Shirley Clarke**

**Hodder Education 2005.**

She also strongly advocated use of the coaching model in dealing with staff and said information could be gathered about this from

**[www.standards.dcef.gov.uk/nationalstrategies](http://www.standards.dcef.gov.uk/nationalstrategies)**

She also strongly recommended

**Being a Skilled Helper by Gerard Egan.**

I was particularly interested to hear about the Fisher Family trust that are responsible for ascribing targets to each student based on their results from their Key Stage 2 assessments as well as a socioeconomic weighting which comes from the students postcode. At regular intervals teachers are required to present information from their classes as to how the students are performing relative to their individual target for that subject. The students are told what their targeted performance should be. There is a lot of talk here about learning with frequent

dialogue between teachers and students about the things that make a difference to learning. The school provides resources for students who have literacy and numeracy deficits. A Head of Department takes a lead in writing plans for individual student improvement as well as providing programmes for teaching assistants to work either with individuals or small groups. The HoD recommended a number of commercial programmes for use with students. They are:

**[www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/spelling](http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/spelling)**

**Lexia** – a phonics programme

**Star Spell** by Fisher Marriot Software

**Carron Practical's**

As well as **Toe by Toe**

Fairfield was also creating ways that management of the school could have a clear understanding of what was happening in classrooms, so as well as the usual appraisal visits the managers also conducted 'learning walks'. They believe they can get an accurate 'feel' for the lesson through comparatively brief classroom visits. HoD's create their own assessments to complete in each classroom detailing the things they are looking for.

The school was well resourced with interactive whiteboards in most classrooms and large numbers of computers, both in designated classrooms as well as a number of computers in most classrooms. The school is working with the fact that their main school building is grade 2 listed, meaning the essential fabric of the building cannot be altered. They have been creative in reusing spaces e.g. the office of one of the Assistant Principals is the former head teachers bathroom, while the newly appointed staff member for data input works in the former Head Teacher's toilet. Despite the constraints that the buildings bring, the school has a really nice tone and the classrooms seem to provide an excellent learning environment. Despite being a state school, Fairfield have considerable contact with the Moravian church with their special events being held in the church, including the annual presentation evenings for upper and lower school, as well as the year 11 leaver's service of thanksgiving and the carol service. Religious education is part of the school curriculum as this is part of the agreed curriculum with the local education authority.

**Tuesday 9 March, 2010**

**Priestnall School**

**Heaton Mersey**

**Stockport**

**Head Teacher: Mrs Jo Morgan**

Priestnall is an 11-16 secondary school situated in Heaton Mersey Stockport with approximately 1300 students. The housing around the school shows it to be a predominantly middle class area. Despite the obvious comfort of the surrounding area, the school also draws upon a quite disadvantaged part of Manchester, which means that the school has to cater for a very wide range of students intellectually, as well as socially and in terms of mental and physical health. The staff governor is the director of learning curriculum support and is extremely well regarded. The most recent Ofsted visit was to focus particularly on how the school copes with vulnerable learners. Vulnerable learners are described as SEN, looked after children and those on free school meals. The school was judged as outstanding because of the support and guidance that these students receive. The Director of learning curriculum support is working on a PhD currently and has excellent links with the universities so that he is able to source specialist staff training in those areas where their vulnerable students figure. A case in point is work that they have done around the subject of autism, because the school has developed a partnership with a local specialist provider for students with autistic spectrum disorders. The school's GCSE results are around 75% A\* - C grades and this has not suffered as a result of maths and English having to be counted as has happened in many other schools.

The school is very achievement focussed and the Head is trying to find a way of arriving at more challenging targets than those provided by the Fisher Family trust. All around the school there is information about previous pass rates and targets. Each HoD has on either their door or notice board a table showing pass rates in that subject over the past few years with an imprecation to better it for this year. The appraisal cycle is a key part of raising student achievement. The school has aligned what they look for to match what Ofsted look for, and so the staff receive feedback on those specific areas of performance. The general performance of the staff is mapped, department-by-department, in a format which instantly indicates where areas of strength and weakness are across the staff. This information gives a good lead as to where professional development should be targeted as well as providing information as to who on the staff could provide that training.

As a new head Mrs Morgan radically reorganised the school believing that the size of the school did not allow students to be known and looked after as well as they could be in a smaller institution. She worked with the staff to identify 5 iconic buildings around Manchester whose names have now been given to each of the 5 new 'colleges'. The names include 'Bridgewater' after the concert hall and Imperial after the Imperial War Museum. Interestingly the staff that make up a particular college all teach in the same curriculum grouping with classrooms all adjacent and that part of the school is painted in the college colour. School assemblies are held for each college once a week and level assemblies are held infrequently. There is a competitive element in the relationships between the 5 colleges with points being gained for attendance and a lack of late notes. Within each college the top form class is recognised in assembly.

The physical environment of the school is a little tired although efforts are made to keep the place maintained. Again the school is well resourced with interactive whiteboards in most classrooms. There were fewer computers here, but still a perfectly acceptable number.

The school takes a lead in organising events for contributing primary schools. On the day I visited, a netball event was due to take place where senior students and staff would provide some leadership with appropriate rewards for the winners. This is all part of their role as a school with a sports specialism. This was a very good school that gave off an aura of confidence. The head and her deputy were particularly energetic in pursuing high standards. A large proportion of the students chose to eat the school meal, which gave many healthy options. The school employed the catering staff and they said their aim was to basically break even because their major consideration was providing a good product.

**Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2010**

**Levenshulme High School**

**Levenshulme**

**Manchester**

**Head Teacher: Mrs Amanda Thain**

Levenshulme High School is a former grammar school for girls, which was opened in 1928. It is a school of over 900 students and although surrounded by some reasonable housing, they are concerned that they are attracting students from further afield from less desirable postcodes. They are also concerned that the school is seen as a place for Muslim girls and certainly a tour of the school indicated that white British students were a very small minority. The Head is newly appointed and is still in her first term at Levenshulme, having come from a formerly very tough school in London which has undergone a transformation following its reopening as an academy. (Burlington Danes is a school with a 400-year-old history in White City London. It has an association with the Anglican Church. I visited this school in 2002 and can testify that it was indeed challenging. It apparently deteriorated even further until it was reopened as an academy funded by an entrepreneur.)

This school has a language specialism and teaches a huge range of languages and makes the learning of a language compulsory until the final year. The following languages are offered: French, German, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, Urdu and Bengali with Mandarin offered on Saturday mornings. The school also enters students who are native speakers of some of these languages into examinations well before the year in which such qualifications would normally sat. As well as this they have links with many other countries in a variety of ways: Chile, China, Germany, Iran, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Norway, Spain, Tanzania and Trinidad and Tobago. Students take part in International themed days where people from different cultures are brought in to demonstrate different cultural activities.

The school excels in pastoral care although the new head says she has yet to get a handle on how it all meshes together, but feels that some tweaking might be required.

She is deeply concerned that the school failed to meet its target GCSE pass rate last year and so is wanting to find ways to improve performance. Her previous experience at Burlington Danes leads her to believe that the answer lies in placing more emphasis on teaching and learning. She is keen to promote assessment for learning, as she believes this will give more focus to the students work in that they will specifically know how to improve. She recalled her experience at Burlington Danes where they made the decision to stop talking about behaviour and only concentrate on learning. This apparently produced a positive change. She is concerned about the targets, which come from the Fisher Family Trust, as she believes that they encourage students and teachers to make excuses about a lack of student performance based on where the students live. I explained that in New Zealand we call this deficit

thinking. She believes that the school currently does not place enough emphasis on tracking student progress and that changing this, coupled with appropriate targets, should improve performance. She is concerned that currently teachers cannot tell her 'where students are with their learning right now'.

The school currently operates mixed ability classes and she would like to introduce some form of streaming with the more able classes being larger in size, thus allowing the less able classes to be of smaller size. She would like then to withdraw students in groups of about 6 to work on specific skill deficits in both English and maths, since there is a hugely increased focus on these two subjects from the government, (a reaction to some schools artificially inflating their GCSE pass rates by not requiring students to study Maths and English but easier vocational subjects instead).

As part of her repositioning of the school, the Head would like to call each teaching room after a university to make students aware of the diversity of choices on offer. She even wonders whether the room could be named after the university that the teacher who occupies the room attended. She is interested in finding ways to raise student aspirations because the cultures represented in the school, as well as the socio economic status of the families, means that there are not high aspirations for girls. She would like to find ways of tapping into the old girls of the school, and wonders whether they could be encouraged into the school to help with homework.

**Tuesday 16 March 2010**

**Stretford High School**

**Stretford**

**Manchester**

**Head Teacher (acting) Mr Eddie Malone**

Stretford High School is a relatively small school by British city standards at 760 students. The school has been on an amazing journey over the past few years. In 2004 their A\* - C pass rate for GCSE was 17% which placed them in the bottom 5% of schools, but in 2009 it was 74%. Interestingly the government has wised up to schools 'artificially' inflating their pass rates by studying 'soft' options and has over the last two years said that the 5 A\*-C grades must include English and maths. This move has produced an interesting change in Stretford's results. In 2008 this gave them a pass rate of 31% and in 2009 it rose to 49%.

Schools where less than 30% of students achieve A\*-C are now called National Challenge schools. Undoubtedly the appointment of Derek Davies was a turning point for the school. He was described as inspirational but also Machiavellian.

Despite this, their progress is remarkable. In 2004 they were placed in Special Measures and yet in 2008 were rated by Ofsted as an outstanding school. As well as this they received the award for the most improved specialist languages college in England in 2008, and they are in the top 5% of schools for value added over the last 3 years. As a result of this they have been allowed to take up a second specialism, which is raising student achievement. They are working closely with Manchester Metropolitan University on research in the following areas:

Able Gifted and Talented Achievement in Y10 English

Able Gifted and Talented Achievement in Y11 maths

Able Gifted and Talented Achievement in KS3 English and Maths

Raising the achievement of White British Students in KS4

Raising Achievement through KS2-3 Transition

The funding for this comes from a government project called RAPP. They have also used this funding to develop a reading recovery project using Lexia software, and in an attempt to increase attendance thus leading to better achievement, have installed a first day call system for any student absentees. They are mentoring other less successful schools and assisting them to make the same gains that they have.

In terms of their students who are underperforming in English, the school has found that 50 students fall into this category and each receives 2x 15 minute Lexia sessions per week, while ensuring that they do not miss the same class regularly and never during English classes. Before embarking on this, they undertook a 3-month trial, which convinced them of the efficacy of this approach. The Lexia software can produce worksheets tailored to the weaknesses identified during the student's time working on the computer programme. As well as this they are also using 'Toe by Toe', and pupils I spoke to said they found the classes enjoyable. This is perhaps because they are experiencing some success.

English has been particularly well regarded with the HoD being invited to attend a special meeting with Ofsted in London, along with other successful HoD's, to work on a document called 'English at the crossroads – an evaluation of English in primary and secondary schools 2005/08'.

Literacy and English have had a huge push at Stretford and the HoD described some of the things they have done. The school makes a real occasion of World book Day that is apparently on March 4<sup>th</sup> every year. They have begun a reading club, which meets on a Monday and Thursday. It is an informal group who get together because they love books.

They are also involved in special cross-curricular projects with each of their junior levels. The year 7's is called 'Project 7' and so forth. Topics worked on have included Human Rights, crime, Shakespeare etc. At other levels the lead does not come from the English department. This all sounded very like Priestnall's Deep Learning Days'. They use every opportunity to get students out into the community, to address the fact that many of their students come from homes that are culturally unenriched.

The HoD provided me with a list of novels that had been very popular with her students, some of these were known to me while others I doubt would travel well to our environment.

It has been the philosophy of the school to apply for funding from whatever funding source is available including the US Embassy, the British Council etc and the hope is that they will be able to employ a writer in residence.

They owe the success of the school to the fact that improvement has been a whole school drive. The 4-part lesson is used by every teacher with the learning outcomes on the board. Subject leaders check that everyone is doing their job and there are leadership meetings 3 times a week.

The Director of professional development sees it as her job to put the 'weak' in touch with the 'strong' in their teaching workforce.

Assessment for learning has been their major focus and they attribute most of their success to this approach. English teachers regularly mark student work with the student because students are clear on the expected standard. They regularly use EBI meaning 'Even better if

...” to provide a pointer towards more success. They also will photocopy the work of a good student and give it to the whole class to mark. They will also have a lesson where students are asked to prepare a piece of reading in advance. The students of the class will be asked to praise the strengths of the reading and assess the reading level of the student and to assess their own reading level and EBI's.

The HoD says there is an intensity in their learning and they make learning as personalised as they can. They do not set the students an essay without doing it themselves. They identify students to be 'Lead learners' and will use these to do some of the teaching of the lesson and they will use the good group to lead the plenary session at the end of each lesson. The day I visited Stretford they were touring the candidates for head teacher around the school as Derek Davies had moved on to another underperforming school. It was suggested that this was probably caused by the fact that Stretford is going to be closed and reopened as an academy combining with an unsuccessful school in their neighbourhood which has a falling roll. Current staff will be reemployed, but not necessarily in the same positions, although their salary will be protected for 3 years.



**Wednesday 17 March, 2010**

**Ashton on Mersey School**

**Sale**

**Cheshire**

**Executive Head Teacher Mr Tarun Kapur**

**Head Teacher Mrs Vicki Beer**

The education provided here is to some extent a historical relic as students still sit the 11+ examinations and the top 35% go to Grammar schools. Ashton on Mersey is therefore a secondary modern school and has to deal with the fact that when their students arrive they already feel like failures. The school has to be all things to all people because there are a minority of parents who refuse to put their children

through the gruelling 11+ examination and as well as this there are students who may have been excluded on the basis of a performance which was less than their best. I was told that numbers of parents actively coach their children for the exam, as do some contributing schools in order to make themselves look like good schools.

Mr Tarun Kapur has been the Head of Ashton on Mersey but such is the excellence of his management that he has been awarded a CBE and has now assumed the status of Executive head teacher because he is also head of two other schools who have been struggling – Parr's Wood and Broadoak. Recent publicity has announced that Parr's Wood is now out of special measures thanks to the work of Mr Kapur.

Ashton on Mersey's first area of specialism was sports but they have been permitted to take up a second specialism, that of vocational education. As well as this the school has been allowed to have a sixth form which is now in its second year of operation. They are awaiting the first A level results with nervousness. On site the school has what we would call a College of Education and they train teachers using two approaches:

PGCE – the traditional course for graduates and they work with Manchester metropolitan university here, and

PTP - which is a type of teacher training where the teacher learns on the job.

A consequence of this involvement is that the school is very au fait with current policy and indicated that the government has a goal for all teachers to have a Masters degree, but has been encouraged to abandon a goal of having each beginning teacher begin their Masters in that first year. New teachers in England have a close to normal timetable and they are considered trained after one year rather than our two.

People are not considered for head's positions without first completing a National Professional Qualification for Headship through the National College for School Leadership. This regulation has been in place since 2009.

Like all schools visited, Assessment for Learning has been a major focus for the school with teachers believing the practice has had the most positive impact on raising student achievement. The HoD English felt that AFL had more significance in the junior years before students sat examinations. An extra thing for schools to deal with here is the fact that there is more than one examining board for senior school qualifications. The HoD was wondering about the feasibility of using two boards i.e. the top two classes using AQA and the rest using Ed excel. The HoD felt that secondary schools place less emphasis on literacy. He had been able to access some help from outside where a group of children could be worked with over a 12-week period on a one to one basis targeting particular areas of weakness like inference, deduction and writing. Ashton Mersey operates a homeroom for the weakest year 7, 8 and 9 students, which usually means the bottom 10 students from each cohort.

Their big buzzword was APP meaning assessing pupil progress. They are also into peer assessment or self-assessment. The students know their targets because they all have the matrix of what is required for each curriculum level for each subject they study. Students are able to identify where they need to go.

In terms of sharing good practice, the school operates 'cross observation' weeks where staff are encouraged to observe another teacher from outside their subject area and then write down one idea they could steal. Every teachers meeting has to have a sharing good practice slot, even if the contribution is very brief. They believe they have achieved a culture of being an 'open school' so that staff are very comfortable with other staff moving in and out of their classrooms. Increasingly for their professional development days they do not access outside facilitators but encourage staff to offer workshops from which staff would choose 2 or 3. The staff are very comfortable delivering for colleagues. Apparently 90% of their staff have delivered on one topic or another. The office staff have also joined in by delivering ICT skills or gaining work specific knowledge from teachers. Managers believe that their most important job is managing the quality of teaching and learning.

Of particular interest is the way in which the school serves the needs of a very diverse group of learners. Year 10 students are divided according to their choice into four bands that undertake widely differing courses of study. One of the bands is composed of traditional GCSE subjects, which prepare students for an academic path. The other three bands have varying degrees of involvement with outside providers and lead to a more trades based qualification.

Friday 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2010



**Altrincham Grammar School  
for Girls**

**Bowdon**

**Cheshire**

**Head Teacher Mrs Dana Ross-  
Wawrynski**

Altrincham is a girls' grammar school whose roll is made up of those girls who have passed the 11+ exam. The school has a roll of 1300 and is very oversubscribed so passing the examination is not sufficient.

You either have to be one of the 200 girls who live closest to the school, or have an older sister who is currently a student. The school is 100 years old and is on three sites. It is in an area of £million houses, but the school has been able to progressively buy other properties, so that they are now housed in some beautiful old stone buildings which have been tastefully renovated and added to. The Head Teacher's husband is an architect and everything was very tasteful. It would be the only staff room I have ever seen with a grand piano and leather sofas and morning tea provided to encourage staff to come to the staff room rather than stay on their own site.

The school has two specialisms: languages and as a training school. It has been consistently judged by Ofsted as outstanding for many years and has also won awards for the manner in which they use their language specialism. Apparently both their council and both political parties are very opposed to the concept of grammar schools but there would need to be a groundswell of community dissatisfaction for them to be got rid of, which is not going to happen when the results from the schools under the jurisdiction of the Trafford Council are near the top of the league tables. Altrincham Girls for example has a 100% pass rate in GCSE and has set itself the goal that no girl will ever get less than a B grade for any subject. Their head is an official 'Leader of Education' and the school is a 'national support school'. They have over 50 feeder schools including a fee paying prep school and are very aware of the level of coaching that goes on to help ensure that students pass their 11+. Over 700 girls sat their exam last year for 200 places.

As a language specialist school they see their role as not only to have 3 languages in their school curriculum and to make the learning of at least one language to the end of GCSE compulsory, but they also provide languages to the community. They provide lessons out of school hours in Japanese, Italian, Arabic and they have taught Chinese. They have won an International School award 3 times – these are awarded for 3 years so they have held this title for 9 years. An international perspective is incorporated in every part of the curriculum whether it is art, music, technology or maths. When they look at statistics they will always use statistics from countries other than Britain.

For ten years they have maintained a strong relationship with a rural school in South Africa called Zephania. They have helped build a library and have paid for the staff and student leavers to travel to Britain to spend time in their school. Altrincham persuaded a British firm to sponsor a computer room at the South African school and Altrincham fund a teacher for

the school and have helped set up a centre to train apprentices in hairdressing, mechanics and other work areas.

They are also involved with an exchange with a school in Germany where the British girls have 10 days work experience in German firms to reinforce the importance of being multilingual.

They have also initiated a scheme with a school in Beijing to bring their teachers of Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics and IT to Altrincham so that those teachers can learn to deliver their curriculum in English. The Chinese students then sit the International GCSE. The scheme was funded by the Chinese students being charged a fee but a change in politics in China has made this unacceptable.

They see themselves as a very open school and they have lots of visitors. They are confronting a new problem which is the arrival in their school of very mathematically bright students from other countries who do not have English as a first language and knowing what to do with them. I felt that we were ahead of the game here.

A huge pressure in British education at the moment is for collaboration; and if there is no evidence that a school is collaborating with other schools it cannot be designated an outstanding school by Ofsted. A project was begun in London called 'The London challenge'. This has spread now to Manchester and Birmingham because all three cities have some appalling schools. Millions of pounds have been poured in to help the failing schools and Heads of successful schools are asked to take a failing school 'under their wing' as all the research says it's the leadership which makes the difference. Altrincham has taken on a school in North Manchester where only 11% of students got 5 A\*-C grades in GCSE including maths and English. The authority has given them the goal of getting 30% through this year but Altrincham quietly believes that they could get 50% through. The first thing Altrincham did was send one of their assistant heads that was solely responsible for attendance and discipline. This was funded by the Manchester Challenge. The HoD's partnered off with the HoD's from the Manchester school to provide help with teaching and learning. The physical environment of the Manchester school is very poor and the decision has been made to close it and reopen as an academy in brand new buildings next year. The new Head and Deputy have been appointed and they have asked Altrincham to continue to be involved in the future. Apparently this model of funding schools can produce conflict as school management and the funding company can have differing priorities. The first thing the Altrincham Head did was to find ways of getting rid of bad staff and then looked very carefully at the year 11 students to ascertain exactly what sort of curriculum would suit them. She also brought in extra teachers e.g. people who were retired who were good maths teachers. Intensive maths days were organised with extra classes on Saturdays. The students were taken to a restaurant and their final class was held at a hotel which was at first reluctant to take the booking as the school had a very bad name. The challenge is funded until mid 2011.

For their second specialism they have the role of a training school. They are one of 3 schools in the North West with this role. The programme they deliver was written by Ravens Wood School in Bromley and delivers 3 programmes.

1. Improving teachers from satisfactory to good.
2. Outstanding teachers programme so that they can sustain quality teaching.
3. Middle leaders and their learning needs.

The big focus is on producing independent learners. Of interest I thought is the fact that school assemblies must have Christian content and an element of worship.



**Monday March 22, 2010**

**Denbigh High School**

**Alexandra Avenue**

**Luton**

**Executive Head Teacher Dame Yasmin Bevan**

Dame Yasmin is in her 19<sup>th</sup> year of headship and has sustained an amazing level of energy and creativity. Denbigh High School was a very challenging school

when she took it over. She said that her appointing board would have felt that they had nothing to lose by appointing her as the school was already so dire. At present 92% of the students are minority ethnic and for 88% of them English is not their first language. Close to 30% of the students are on free school meals. A large number of the students on entry are more than two terms behind where they should be.

Dame Yasmin was Bangladeshi by birth and came to England at the age of 15. Her father was the Pakistani Ambassador and while they were in England Bangladesh became independent. The family decided to stay on and Dame Yasmin completed an Economics degree. She says she drifted into teaching and began in Bristol in a very challenging school. She was proud of the fact that one of her students managed to get into Cambridge.

At age 38 she was appointed Head of Denbigh. She said that everyone expected her to fail but she felt she had nothing to lose. There were no measures from which she could derive goals so she made some up. Her predecessor had been in the job for 7 years and it was a totally divided staff. The staff were into deficit thinking and there were generally poor relations within the school.



Her mantra is 'High Achievement for all is a shared responsibility'. The school has a broad curriculum and really values prior learning, particularly in languages. She has been asked to take responsibility for running a neighbouring boy's school of 800 students. She says this is happening more and more because there aren't enough good people available. Their collaboration is for a slightly different reason however. The boys' school was not a failing school but was actually quite

good, but when their head left they were worried that they would slip back. She is at the other

school for 2 days per week and a Head has also been appointed to Denbigh but she is the Executive Head. This was the first federation to take place in this area. At this stage in her career Dame Yasmin sees it as her mission to keep the school as outstanding according to Ofsted criteria. They were judged to be 'the Times Educational Supplement School of the Year for 2009'.

Achievement is celebrated at Denbigh. There are wonderful visual displays of students who have achieved particular results at GCSE. The students seem proud to be acknowledged. They hold excellence evenings for parents where they are able to recognise outstanding student achievement. They also try and get as much publicity for their achievements as they possibly can.

The Fischer trust goals come in 4 bands with D being the most challenging. Dame Yasmin sets her goals now from this area.

It was obvious moving through the school with Dame Yasmin that she is revered and this will come no doubt from her incredible charm. She speaks to everyone she passes and seems to remember something positive to comment to each person about. The new head of the school is a former deputy who moved to Scotland to be head of his own school but said he could not pass up the opportunity to work with Dame Yasmin again when the headship cadship of Denbigh came up.



**Tuesday March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010**

**Helenswood School for Girls**

**The Ridge**

**Hastings**

**Head Teacher Mrs Lucy Monk**

This is a relatively large school at 1400 students and has to operate with the complexity of being on two sites. The school has the distinction of being the only school in Hastings not currently in special measures. Mrs Monk has been there less than a year and has a number of challenges on her plate.

An area that gives her considerable pleasure is the achievement of a very successful mathematics department and she says they do everything she knows will raise achievement. They achieve these results by: target setting, clearly structured lessons, delivering a consistent message, working together as a department, and they target after school and holiday time to organise groups around particular needs.

The Department knows every student's potential and where they are currently at in relation to that potential. The HoD has been in the school close to 30 years and 2 members of his department were in his mathematics classes when they were at school and could not pass up the opportunity to work with him again. They have also been involved with Jo Boaler from the University of Sussex who has done research that indicates that traditional mathematics

teaching is more appropriate for boys. Sufficient emphasis is not placed on girls 'need to know why'. Her book is called 'The Elephant in the Classroom'.

The language department also performs well and uses a lot of assessment for learning.

At the time of Mrs Monk's arrival the school had been without its own head for three years. There was no form of performance management and the school had stagnated. The rest of the management team had been very stable with one having been there 30 years and the other two 26 and 15 years respectively.

She describes the girls in the school as compliant and lovely, with only 11% being entitled to free school lunches and 97% being white British. All of the other schools in Hastings are national challenge schools which poses a problem in that they share a 6<sup>th</sup> form with William Parker Sports College – a boys' school in another part of Hastings. They are the only secondary school in the area to have a 6<sup>th</sup> form and when it became government policy to cluster 6<sup>th</sup> forms together away from 7–11 schools, their staff marched on Downing St to save the 6<sup>th</sup> form, which succeeded.





**Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2010**

**Gilroy High School**

**Gilroy**

**California**

**Principal Dr Marco Sanchez**

Gilroy High School serves a diverse community, however there is a strong presence of private schools so their intake is weighted towards the bottom. As this is a horticultural area, there are a large number of

Mexican immigrants here, and many for whom English is not a first language. Dr Sanchez is himself Puerto Rican and represented that country in the Los Angeles Olympics at wrestling, and is obviously quite a role model for his students. The school has 2000 students and covers a reasonably large geographic area. The school owns a number of golf carts to assist management in touring the property. The school is 70% Hispanic and only 30% Anglo. They have to deal with the issue of enabling students to access the mainstream curriculum in English, as well as nationally low literacy levels where only 34% of the nation's 12<sup>th</sup> graders meet the national assessment of educational progress standard of reading proficiency for their year level. It is expected that the literacy level required by job seekers in the future will rise by 14%. They use a number of commercial programmes including **Read 180** which is a computer based system designed to be used in the class room to help students make literacy gains. As well as this, they use a programme called **Rosetta stone**, which although relatively expensive provides an impressive way for people to learn other languages. They of course use this with Mexican students to aid them in their English learning. They are working hard to overcome student truancy and operate a Saturday school 2 or 3 times a month to catch up the work that students have missed through truancy. There is strong pressure not to suspend students from school attendance and so they offer a very interesting in-school suspension system. They have hired a supervisor who takes responsibility for this group of students. They have their breaks at separate times to the rest of the school, but if they 'volunteer' to clean up the school grounds after lunch they can leave when everybody else does, and not stay till 4pm. They wear vests that say 'volunteer' as they do this. Each school district keeps quite close tabs on the goal setting and achievement of each school, and their performance in relation to their goals is easily accessible.

The economic downturn was having a huge impact on schools. Dr Sanchez was having to find a way of saving millions and in many school districts teachers are being laid off and consequently class sizes are being increased. Gilroy High school faces the threat that a brand new High school has just opened in their town, which is a state of the art 'digital' school. He had already had to make some teachers redundant because of this. I was surprised at the lack of technology here when they were only a half hour drive from Silicon Valley. Teachers all had data projectors but seemed very excited about a device called an 'Elmo' which seems to be a modern form of epidiascope. I had a long discussion with a student from Palo Alto whose high school is the closest to Silicon Valley and most of the parents work in the computer industry and asked him about the level of technology in his school. He said only the mathematics department had smart boards but he foresaw that the physics teachers would be getting them soon.

## **Themes**

### **Literacy**

This is undoubtedly a huge topic for schools wherever I went. Having talked to Keda Cowling I did wonder whether this was just a problem for the English speaking world given the complexity of English. The advantage that both Britain and the US have is that given the size of their population it has been economically viable for firms to produce specific literacy programmes designed for their population. Teachers spoken to were very enthusiastic about programmes such as Lexia, Read 180 and Rosetta stone, Star Spell as well as programmes devised by the BBC. It is obviously important that such programmes be current and relevant as secondary students who encounter problems with literacy will have already experienced years of failure and will be quite sensitive to any implication that they are 'dumb'. I had the opportunity to speak to students in classes and they appeared to feel positively about their learning.

### **Academies**

Academies are now widespread and are provided with an enormous amount of money from private sources. Often this will come from a captain of industry who has a long held belief that money fixes all problems. Certainly the performance of previously failing schools has improved dramatically when the old school is closed, renamed and provided with state of the art facilities which look like large hotels. In all cases there has been a considerable turnover of staff which is likely to have had the greater impact.

### **Assessment for learning**

This was talked about everywhere. Many schools attributed their improved results with adopting this approach. Students had a very clear idea of what standard was required and were provided with templates to allow them to see exactly what the marker would need to see to enable them to achieve or to advance to the next level. I saw a lot of peer marking being used because such was the student's familiarity with the standard that they could skilfully assist their peers with positive suggestions for improvement. Teachers would frequently use exemplars of student work to allow the students to collectively ascertain the standard of the work. Teachers also told me that they would not think of setting students a piece of writing without first doing the writing themselves. One teacher commented to me 'we don't talk about behaviour, we only talk about learning'.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is huge. Schools cannot be called outstanding by Ofsted if they are not involved in collaborative programmes with other schools. Numbers of the Principals I met were running more than one school and 'borrowing' staff from their successful school to provide some illumination to the staff in the underachieving school. At least two of the schools I visited had chosen being a training school as one of their specialisms.

### **International Links**

For an English school to be considered successful they must have links with schools or institutions overseas. Altrincham Girls' Grammar School had for example won a national award for the extent to which they had an international focus. Contributing to this were their link with a poor South African school who they had sponsored including: supplying a teacher, providing professional development to Chinese teachers in how to teach Maths and Science subjects in English, and the German work experience they arrange for their students. Many of these activities support their language specialism.

## **Specialisms**

The practice of schools having specialist status in particular areas of the curriculum has been in place for a long time in England. What has changed over recent years is that now some schools have taken on a second specialism. This doesn't seem to usually be a second curriculum area but may be a training status eg Ashton Mersey operating a fully fledged teacher training programme and Stretford running professional development for whatever school wants to pay for it. If you do not perform then your specialism is taken away, but I saw many excellent examples of how great success in one area of school life has led to a lifting of performance right across the school. Considerable extra funding is given to support the specialism and where this has been used to improve facilities it has engendered a huge lifting of performance. Both Ashton Mersey and Denbigh used their sports specialism to particularly good effect.

## **Leadership**

It was my very great privilege to meet some fine educational leaders. In most cases their leadership had been recognised and they had been asked to take responsibility for one or more additional schools. It was particularly interesting to see the journeys that some schools had been on. Parr's Wood, which Mr Tarun Kapur had just rescued from the brink of disaster, was a previously high performing school but after the departure of the long serving Principal a very poor appointment was made to the Principal's position and the school had gone into 'special measures' in less than 2 years. Stretford High School had been in special measures and following the appointment of a new Principal rose to the status of being an 'outstanding' school in a very short period of time.

## **Workforce Reform**

As a result of a previous salary claim a change was made to the employment conditions of British teachers which was called 'workplace reform'. This was a change to the working conditions of teachers whereby they will now only teach and will not perform any other duties such as putting posters on the walls. As part of this, there is a 'rarely cover' policy which means that staff need a very good reason and it needs to be a genuine reason if they are asked to cover someone else's class. This added to the ban on extra-curricular activities which was a result of industrial action a decade ago means that there is a certain sterility and lack of corporate spirit in British schools. Added to this is that because of funding constraints schools now use 'teaching assistants' to cover classes and perform the tasks that teachers used to do, and because they are so much cheaper to employ they are now doing whole class teaching and replacing teachers in every part of the job resulting in a huge cost saving.

## **Uniforms**

A law has been passed which means that a school cannot specify who the supplier of their uniform is and if for example their uniform specifies a black skirt then the student may wear whatever black skirt which comes to hand. The Head of Fairfield was pleased that his designated school uniform fabric had an unobtrusive line in it meaning that 'any black skirt' would not do so in this way he was able to ensure that the uniform was to a good standard. Nobody insists that the students wear their uniform correctly on the way to and from school as to do so would mean that they are legally responsible should anything go wrong and they would be sued for negligence.

The standard of uniform wearing seems to be not as good as in New Zealand with girls' skirts incredibly short and copious makeup worn.

### **The place of Grammar Schools**

It was very interesting seeing a grammar school in action as these are very rare. Obviously an excellent education was being provided. Such schools have in the past served a useful social purpose by educating the bright children of families who could not afford private education. Many political and business leaders in England are products of grammar schools. I find it interesting to look at the results of the recent British election where the new PM and his deputy are products of some of the most expensive education available and it almost seems as if the demise of the grammar schools serve to further entrench the British class system by denying the children of the poor access to an education whereby they can improve their station in life.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am very grateful to the Ministry of Education for this award which I undertook over terms one and two in 2010. I have returned to my school with an abundance of ideas and plans which I am looking forward to implementing. I am also enjoying the opportunity to share both pitfalls associated with what I have seen as well as useful avenues to pursue.