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Abstract

“Let’s write a book about improving our school”

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Many schools think of valuable new ideas and work hard to put them into practice. Unfortunately, the people who are most busy improving their school often have the least time to record and publish their ideas. This article describes how I helped one school to write a book about their improvements and outlines the stages of the work. Improvement involves changing approaches and beliefs, if progress is to be substantial and lasting. The second main theme in this article is the crucial importance of involving the students as partners in improving schools, and it examines theories which promote or prevent student involvement and positive behaviour in schools. The vital need for teachers to be aware of the theories which inform all their work are considered. This article does not attempt to summarise the book, but concentrates on the methods of creating the book and the theories underlying it.

“Let’s write a book about improving our school”

Floating the idea

In April 1996 I heard a head teacher, Lorna Farrington, talk about Highfield junior school in Plymouth. Five years earlier the school had many problems, violence and vandalism and a poor reputation. Gradually new ideas were tried: assertive discipline, circle time, guardian angels, bully busters, school’s council and peer mediation. The school is now a peaceful and creative place with a rising reputation and a glowing OFSTED report. For over two years, no one has been excluded, and when excluded pupils are referred to Highfield they settle in well. Over half the children have free school meals and identified special educational needs.

Many other schools are developing similar ideas. Highfield is unusual in combining several methods in ways which strengthen all of them, and also in involving the children as partners. Sadly, the people who are most busy trying out new ideas in schools, often have the least time to record and publish them. Yet reports of this work can be so useful, to inform other schools about

new approaches, and help those already trying out similar ideas to avoid some mistakes and not to feel that they each have to reinvent the wheel. Teachers at the April conference asked eagerly, “Have you got a written report we could use?” and Lorna replied, “Unfortunately, we haven’t got time to write one, apart from the school policy statements.”

As a fulltime researcher, my work is to design research projects, apply for grants, collect data through surveys, interviews, observations and literature reviews, analyse the data and write books and journal papers. I asked Lorna if the school would like to have a “writer in residence” to help them to write a book. I said I might be able to get a grant, including expenses such as staying at a hotel. “Stay with me,” she replied, to my surprise because arranging access to schools can be the slowest part of a project. Lorna consulted with the staff and children and they approved the idea. Staying with the head teacher is extremely useful for collecting data, and we talked into the small hours. I applied to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for a month’s salary, administrative costs and the funds to print a book. Gulbenkian supports practical initiatives which benefit and respect children, and has sponsored some of my other projects. They responded quickly and the book was published in February 1997. The aim of writing the book was to record school improvements, although not in itself to be part of the improvement process.

Creating the book

I spent a few days in the school towards the end of the summer term, and again during an induction week in September when each class learns about new responsibilities. Seeing the end and beginning of the annual cycle was helpful. Each day, I watched lessons, break and lunch times and assemblies. I saw meetings of the school council and house captains, induction sessions, and I spent time in the staff room. One evening, we visited the children staying at Tintagel, where the Atlantic crashes into a narrow inlet; they played rounders and had a barbeque and a disco. The many extra activities seem to encourage a lively, friendly feel about the school.

Everyone knew about the book and was keen to help; the children, the staff including the caretaker and cleaners, and the governors, all talked willingly. I made notes, and taped the more detailed interviews. Some small groups worked with me, drawing illustrations, or talking about their roles as council members, house captains and mediators. When assessing ways of promoting positive behaviour, an important group to interview is the likely trouble-makers. How much do they respect and support the new approaches? On the whole they too were confident and enthusiastic, saying like other older children “We help to run the school.” Their responses confirmed the school policy to respect everyone, expect them to do well, and help them to

channel their energy into positive activities. The topic of the book is staff and children working together, so the method and aim of the book are to involve and quote the children, and to create a book by the whole school which staff and students in other schools can read and use together. The school is the author and I am the editor.

Creating a book is very personal and there are many different methods. Working as a sociology researcher, after transcribing tape-recordings and sorting all notes and other materials, I arrange them under topic headings. I look for themes and emphases in the material, and in a way try to let the contents write the book, rather than planning an outline in advance and fitting the material into it. This method of “grounded theory” searches for themes and theories in the evidence rather than collecting evidence to fit pre-ordained theories, as explained by Glaser and Strauss (1967). One teacher told the five year story and the sequence of steps which changed the school. Her interview provided the format and order of “chapters”, each is about two or three pages long. We do not want to present the ideas as fixed or finished. The ideas are like seeds for each school to grow and adapt in the best way for them. The process of change is as vital as the outcomes.

Originally designed to be a short booklet, the book grew to over 80 A4 pages, half of them consist of school policy statements. We had to find the extra printing costs. A local printer who admired the school gave a generous discount and my research unit kindly lent some funds. Highfield sold out of their copies in two months and reprinted. One school ordered 70 copies, and Lorna was asked to take 400 copies to Northern Ireland. David Blunkett telephoned the school to congratulate them on the book, and Highfield is quoted in the Green Paper *Excellence for all children* (DfEE, 1997). A translation into Japanese is being negotiated. This article ends with a list of the stages of producing a book.

Getting it perfect

Some people ask, when they hear about Highfield, “So don’t they have bullying any more?” Well, of course they do have problems. The point about improving schools is not to get perfection and then sit back. It is to accept that schools are stressful places. They are the only institutions everyone has to attend. Many different kinds of people have to work together in large groups in ways they will never have to do again except by choice, unless they end up in prison. The most useful forms of improvement accept that schools can never be perfect, problems will always arise. It is vital to have effective ways of preventing and reducing problems, and of coping with them when they do arise. This is the main value of circle times, school councils, mediation, and all the other methods described in the book.

Pupils and school improvement

Sammons *et al* (1994) found that effective schools give pupils responsibilities, and Wideen (1994:24) refers to partnership with students in efforts to improve schools. Fullan emphasises how threatening changes can be, and how imposed change is ineffective in comparison with voluntarily adopted change. He emphasises that it is vital to involve and respect teachers but only rather briefly mentions how change affects students (1991:170f). Rudduck and colleagues (1991, 1996) urge respect for teachers and pupils, who should be treated as actors and not as the victims or puppets of change (1991:21). They have researched mainly in secondary schools, through indirect questioning of pupils (1996:7-9, 41-2), and rely heavily on their own adult interpretations. Their few references to pupils' actual involvement in changes tend to be rather negative, as in reports of students resisting and sabotaging change (1991:23,57,60). The report of a "humanities curriculum project" to help a ninth stream 14-15-year old group to discuss controversies (1991:65) describes their inability to spell the project title (why not use a clear, vivid title?), and their presumed inability to understand principles such as the "neutral chairperson". Yet the problem may have been the researchers' limited explanations. The group probably knew all about the similar role of neutral football referees. Practical problems encountered during their group discussion are easily resolved in infant schools when, for instance, each child speaker rolls a ball or passes an object to the next speaker. Rudduck *et al* mention the older pupils' difficulties with the "new skills" of discussing and listening to each other, but this ignores the richness of even young children's conversations (Tizzard and Hughes, 1984; MacNamara and Moreton, 1997). The school improvement literature tends to speak of adults in the active voice, they decide, organise, plan, instigate, worry about and motivate pupils, who usually are referred to in the passive voice.

The Highfield book is very unusual in involving junior pupils, in observing and discussing with them their direct activities with school improvement, and in reporting their experiences in their own words. The next section considers why these aspects of the Highfield book are almost entirely missing in the education literature.

Theories of childhood

As Fullan and Rudduck emphasise, lasting and substantial improvement has to involve changes in the use of materials, teaching approaches, and beliefs in "pedagogical assumptions and theories underlying particular new policies" (Fullan, 1991:37). Jonathan sees school

improvement as “dealing with the deep structures of school organisation and the values and habits they embody” (1987:568). These theories and values include beliefs about what it means to be a child or teenager, which have to be questioned when they are unrealistic and negative, if schools are to promote positive behaviour by involving all the students, and not simply excluding some.

My main area of research is the study of childhood which examines changing theories and practices relating to children, and sees them as competent social actors (James and Prout, 1996; Qvortrup et al, 1994; Mayall, 1994). Unfortunately childhood studies have had little impact so far on teaching, though they could be extremely useful to the profession. Here are some of the dominant theories about childhood in modern societies, each followed by some comments which show how questionable they are; the comments very briefly summarise a wide literature.

Questioning dominant theories about childhood

1. Childhood is a time of inexperience, ignorance and dependence.

History and reports from the “third world” today, show that the above beliefs about childhood are very unusual. In most times and places, after infancy most children become workers and contributors. They quickly become experienced and knowledgeable, interdependent rather than dependent members of society. Children aged ten or less run small businesses and even household, for example if they lose their parents through war or AIDS. Children who are refugees or who live in poverty gain profound knowledge and experience which many adults do not have.

2. Children cannot have adult understanding and reason, and they need firm adult supervision and control.

Two and three-year-olds talk about morality and show clear understanding of the three main ethical principles: justice or being fair, beneficence or being kind, and respect for autonomy. When children are informed and are expected to be responsible moral agents, many show that they can understand and reason maturely. For example, some hospital staff respect young children’s decisions to have or to refuse major surgery, such as a heart-lung transplant (Alderson, 1993). My research with children with serious illness or disability found that, instead of firm adult supervision and control, most of the children and adults prefer to share complex and distressing knowledge and decision-making on fairly equal terms. If children want to be informed and consulted on such momentous decisions, they are even more likely to want to share in daily decisions about their schooling and helping to resolve problems.

3. Children develop naturally through stages which should not and cannot be hurried.

The children in the surgery study were often absent from school and they would do badly in SATs. As one senior sister said, “Wisdom has nothing to do with intelligence. When they have been very ill, their understanding of life and death knocks spots off our understanding”. These children do not have to be clever or unusual to be wise, they only have to have the opportunity to show how capable they are. Sheltered children who do not face such challenges are too often dismissed as irresponsible simply because they have not had the chance to prove their real capacities. Research increasingly shows how children’s competence has far more to do with their experience than with their age. They do not develop evenly through natural stages of “readiness”, but unevenly depending on their experiences (Siegal, 1991; Bradley, 1989).

4. Adults are mature, experienced, reliable and rational and, by definition, children are the opposite, becoming an adult means learning and developing these qualities.

Just as children can be wise, adults can be foolish, they drive recklessly, fight wars or mismanage money. It is unrealistic to draw some age divide and assign all good qualities to one side; adults and children have far more similarities than differences.

5. Even if some children can be responsible and independent, it is unkind and unwise to let them be, because they cannot cope with dangers, risks and blame.

Some adults who accept the points 1-4, still believe that it is wrong to let children take responsibility and to risk blame. They argue that our advanced society is better and happier than those in which children have more responsibilities. Of course, many children are grossly overworked and exploited. Yet have we gone too far the other way, insisting that they be dependent and compliant and punishing them when they try to be reasonably independent? Almost all the children I have interviewed, about making personal decisions, want to have at least some say. They dislike not being informed or consulted, and being forced to comply with adults’ decisions. The rates of school exclusions, crime, depression and suicide among young people, and of stress among teachers, indicate that all is not well in schools. My argument is not to transfer power and control from adults to children, but to share responsibility on more equal terms to their mutual benefit.

Some readers may be thinking: “I’d like to do this and I have tried but it is hopeless. Every class has a few children who will spoil it and will never cooperate.” The Highfield book includes ideas

on involving everyone in tackling such difficulties. Also useful is the study of childhood work on constructing and reconstructing childhood (on how theories are built up and mould behaviour which in turn reinforces further theories). When working in a society which tends to see children as problems and liabilities, it is hard to treat them as assets and contributors, to convince them that you have confidence in them, and to encourage them to have confidence in themselves.

Children as the problem or the solution

Surprisingly many reports on improving schools advise calling in experts and consulting the staff, governors and parents, but not the students. If the students are mentioned, it is seldom as sources of imaginative practical ideas and positive energy to help to achieve changes. Fullan's and Rudduck's advice on involving teachers, to gain cooperation and prevent resistance, and to channel potentially very positive resources, also applies to students by far the largest group of people in the school.

To discuss a problem seriously with children (this article is mainly about primary school children) depends on a commitment to working with them, to see them as reliable contributors able to analyse problems and provide new insights and solutions, as Highfield School shows. In some schools, individual teachers who try this succeed, but many are restricted if their colleagues oppose their efforts. Problems occur across the school and cannot all be solved within one class, there have to be structural changes in the school rules, discipline, routines and ethos. Highfield achieved real change by listening to students and staff and working with them and the parents to change structures. Class circle times prepare for the school's council circle time, which in turn reports back to the classes in cycles so that everyone can be involved democratically in inter-class and whole school issues.

This leaves the question: Which comes first, changes in behaviour or in attitudes? Our recent research suggests that the catalyst for change is to see a new approach working successfully (Alderson and Goodey, 1998) so visits to schools like Highfield can help. Individual teachers could start using ideas from the Highfield book with their classes, while also persuading colleagues to question their attitudes including their beliefs about childhood.

Summary of the work of writing a book with a school

There are many ways to do this, including being a teacher in the school and using a publisher when you can miss out some of the stages.

- * Agree the main aims, questions, topics, working methods and timescale with the school;
- * raise funds, including first run printing costs;
- * arrange access and practical details like confidentiality (assure people that they will be reported and quoted anonymously if they wish) and informed consent (telling staff and classes about the project and that they do not have to contribute);
- * visit the school to observe, interview and collect other data such as reports by the school, drawings, and relevant literature collected by the staff;
- * transcribe tape-recordings and sort all notes and other materials;
- * write the book;
- * get printers' estimates;
- * get an ISBN number and plan publicity like a flier with an order form if you want to promote the book widely;
- * send drafts to the school and to a few teachers or other helpfully critical people;
- * revise the draft;
- * check the finished text, drawings and cover with the school;
- * decide the price, to include reprinting costs, post and packing;
- * make final revisions if needed;
- * book the printer's starting and delivery dates;
- * work on design and layout; (You can get other people including printers to do this, but with computers it is fairly easy though time-consuming. If the editor also does the design, then text and layout both benefit. Cutting a word or a sentence can fit the text neatly to the page or make space for a picture. Yet you need to know a lot about the book and exactly which word to cut, if you are not to spoil the text for the sake of design.)
- * deliver the camera ready copy (each page in its final version) or the disc to the printers (or use registered mail and keep a copy), alternatively you might print copies in the school;
- * write short articles for the press and for journals about the book, and contact journalists, reviewers and national and local press, radio and television;
- * check publicity details with the school, the best promotion is when journalists do interviews and take photographs in the school;
- * have an efficient sales and information service, Highfield office staff were excellent;
- * be ready to reprint if the copies sell well.

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