

37 Developing one school's vision

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The school

Stormont House School is a mixed special school for pupils aged 11-16 with a wide range of special educational needs. There is a wide ethnic mix among the students who come from Hackney and eight neighbouring London boroughs. Department for Education and Skills value-added scores place the school in the top 5% of schools nationally.

Developing the vision

As I reflect on the impact of the Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity action research programme on Stormont House, I am repeatedly drawn to the development of a vision for the school as one of the principal outcomes.

Prior to becoming the headteacher of the school in July 2003, I shied away from the 'v' word, largely because I was not comfortable with what I then saw as its connotations – political spin, management speak, hollowness and rhetoric. All that changed, however, as soon as I was appointed to the headship. Now the buck stopped with me; if any aspect of the school was stalling I had a key part to play in moving things forward.

As my appointment more or less coincided with the start of our involvement in the preferred learning styles programme, it remains strongly associated with the way in which I felt empowered to envision the school's future journey. It is no exaggeration to say that the programme acted as a catalyst for my emerging sense of where I wanted to take the school; it was fundamental to the shaping of my vision. The programme strengthened the appreciation (by myself and others) of the importance of individuality and diversity. I think these are issues of general significance within education. For a special school like Stormont House, their significance is amplified, not least because they encourage a shift in critical gaze, from learning difficulties to learning differences.

The preferred learning styles programme worked as a catalyst at a number of levels owing to a number of distinct features. These included the composition of the programme group, the group's way of working, and both the opportunity and time to reflect. The group was made up of people with different roles from different schools, as well as members of the Creative Partnerships London East team and the consultants. As a group we were exposed to many different perspectives and interpretations. The common focus on creativity and learning styles bound the group and programme together but what drove it forward for me was the genuine and open debate of key issues and the challenge to generate innovative solutions to situations in school.

One of the key areas where this experience is having an impact at Stormont House is the way in which continuing professional development is being viewed. What I would term 'the structured informality' of the programme group (encouraging exploration of creative and, as yet untried, practice while maintaining a clear focus) is being replicated by my staff. As a consequence, they are more likely to engage in study or action research groups than to adopt off-the-shelf solutions and packages. Staff are also more ready to explore and change their practice; to work together to make a difference. This is not a wholly new development solely attributable to the action research programme; rather, it is a process that has been strengthened and extended because of our engagement with the programme.

In the pressurised world that is school leadership in the 21st century, headteachers should be forgiven for becoming exclusively pre-occupied with the daily detail of the school community. However, thinking time and space away from the school (and I do not just mean during evening and weekends at home) strikes me as vital for headteachers' capacity to see the

big picture and visualise the need for change. Clearly, the preferred learning styles programme gave me some of that time and space, not only in group meetings and contact with the link consultant, but also through a research trip to America (New York State and Oklahoma). Although away from the daily grind, this was no 'jolly', but an intense and intensive experience, during which ideas were variously floated, challenged and crystallised.

There is a temptation when visiting other schools, especially in a different authority or, as in this case, a different country, to be seduced into thinking that any good practice you see is a 'must have'. The fact that the project group visited America having already established a clear set of hypotheses and a rationale for development may have acted as a defence against that seduction. So, the value of what I observed was not how easily it could be imported to a special school in Hackney, but in its use as a medium for reflecting on and challenging the direction in which Stormont House was heading. The research trip was arguably the most influential part of the action research project in terms of my clarifying a vision for the school.

The ongoing discussions with group members of different theoretical and practical frameworks allowed us to adopt the role of critical friends with the opportunity to ask each other 'how?' 'why?' or 'why not?' I reached the point where I was able to say to a colleague who did not know my school very well, 'I want my school to be...'

Now the cat was out of the bag, and I found the words to express the other parts of my vision. The next conundrum was how to move from my vision to a shared vision, beginning with a presentation to all staff on returning to school. Their response was positive, I think partly due

to the honest nature of what was being presented as well as to its content. In the event, the process was relatively straightforward. The staff and, as importantly, the governors had ample time to reflect and contribute and all were reassured that I had not found a 'better' school that I wanted us to mimic. Responses and engagement were generally positive and several people spoke of the excitement of the challenge. At the end of the process (if there ever is truly an end to this type of activity) we emerged with a shared vision for the school:

Achievement for all

In a unique small school for students who learn differently

By placing creativity at the centre of teaching and learning, breaking down the barriers between subjects

With a staff of skilled reflective practitioners, who are themselves continually learning.

Although I had long since lost my reservations about 'vision', if these words were not to be consigned to the landfill of rhetoric, they needed to be translated into actions that could be observed as making a real difference. An impending Ofsted inspection created a relatively early opportunity for us to test the relationship between vision and practice. Among many positive comments in their report, the inspectors noted:

The school has established a challenging vision of 'Achievement for all' and the creation of an innovative curriculum which breaks down the barriers between subjects, allowing students to apply knowledge and understanding gained from one subject to another and to meet, and often exceed, the challenging targets set for their academic and personal progress. The school is well on track to realise this vision and, as a result, the achievement of pupils of all ages, abilities and backgrounds is excellent in information and communication technology and very good in English, mathematics, science, religious education and art.

And made further reference to:

...a very clear and exciting vision of an exemplary curriculum in which creativity is central to learning, the barriers between subjects are broken down and all students achieve very well. This philosophy has resulted in a highly successful collaboration with Creative Partnerships, an organisation which enables the school to work with outside professionals such as artists and designers to enrich and develop the curriculum.

While an Ofsted inspection is not the only form of meaningful validation, this feedback has been a source of further encouragement for the ideas we have been exploring and implementing over the last couple of years. The Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity action research programme has been a spur to innovation and change but it would be wrong to conclude that there has been a personal or collective 'Road to Damascus' experience. I think it highly unlikely that a refreshed vision for the school could be translated into quality practice, were it not for what had already been established.

Stormont House School has for some time had a good record of moving forward through praxis. We are prepared to take risks in our learning and to encourage students to do likewise, flex our wing muscles, make mistakes and learn from them. We may have already favoured reflection and evaluation based on questions like 'What do you think about what you saw, heard or did?' and 'How will what you saw, heard or did impact on what you do next?' However, the Preferred Learning Styles and Creativity action research programme has guaranteed that we will continue to use enquiry and evidence as the basis for further development.

