A School Approach to Improve Learning

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Summerhill School in Dudley (not the A.S. Neil establishment of the same name) had passed through two Ofsted inspections where teaching was perceived as largely good, but there was a desire to raise these into the excellent category through staff development, sharing of good practice and greater risk-taking in the classroom.

The educational climate at the time abounded in brain theories and learning strategies designed to raise self esteem and, ultimately, student performance.

HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

In 1998 we established a working party to look into existing research and to share ideas. Practical strategies at the time were founded in CASE and CAME projects and research was centred on Chris Dickinson's ideas for effective learning. In 1999, we welcomed Robert Powell to the school with his practical classroom strategies and launched our programme of staff development and the birth of our Learning Policy.
A leading adviser, David Darwood, joined us in the writing of this policy.

The early messages were targeted at making learning fun, utilising classroom displays as reinforcement and on planning for learning. By 2000, we joined with a neighbouring secondary school and aimed a weekend residential at our middle management led by Paul Ginnis, a management consultant who took us through the background of brain-based learning and multiple intelligences before considering the leadership role required to manage change in the classroom. For the remainder of the year, we used Paul's organisation to support English and PE departments with practical strategies in the classroom. In 2001we continued the process by sharing Paul's ideas on intelligence with all staff and via his ideas and departmental workshops, we started to model lessons taken from the schemes of work, using the new strategies.

We were successful in applying to join the Campaign for Learning's pilot project with a research bid based upon learning styles. We had discovered that most teaching was appropriate for auditory or visual learners and that little was imparted in a way that kinaesthetic learners could secure understanding. Our research project was simple. It was designed to measure additional progress provided by kinaesthetic learning. The results were startling.

THE EXPERIMENT

We selected the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science as our starting point and Year 7 since this year was least affected by historical experience within the school.
Each subject provided a class for the experiment and a parallel control class. The control classes would be taught in a traditional way and the experimental group had a kinaesthetic activity added to their learning.

We compared SAT results and CAT tests of the experiment and the control groups to ensure that the results were not going to be affected by differing ability levels.

The Key Stage 2 SAT averages for the **experimental** groups were:

English	4.3	Mathematics	4.6	Science	4.3

This compared to the **control** groups at:

English	4.3	Mathematics	5	Science	4.6

CAT tests (verbal for English, numerical for Maths, aggregated for science) for the **experimental** groups

English	101.1	Mathematics	109.8	Science	99.7

This compared to the **control** groups at:

English	103.5	Mathematics	114.1	Science	103.5

We pre-tested the students' preferred learning styles (see Appendix A for test) and made the experimental groups aware of their preferences. The lessons were prepared with advisory guidance to develop the kinaesthetic strategies and were video-recorded for later analysis. We felt that it would be useful to watch individual students at varying stages of the lesson and see how involved they were and when off task, in relation to the learning style being employed.

We pre tested the students on their knowledge levels and three to five months later – largely via examination questions, tested the received knowledge and understanding of the two groups.

The average percentage learning gain for the **control** groups was:

English	0.6%	Mathematics	5.12%	Science	7.35%

For the **experimental** groups the learning gain was:

English	23.3%	Mathematics	14.85%	Science	41.7%

We learned a great deal from the qualitative analysis as we interviewed students after the lessons to share their feedback. Clearly the students had valued the brain warm-ups, the group working and they felt that they had enjoyed the lessons. However, significantly, they felt that learning could not have really taken place in such an active session. We found kinaesthetic activities were noisier, constricted by furniture, and harder to control in timing.

The sharing of the project results with staff was timed to coincide with a major input from Alistair Smith, the consultant for Accelerated Learning (ALITE) in September 2001. Enthusiasm was restored and conviction in the strategies further embedded. This was a hearts and minds gathering and was a day shared with our feeder primary school staff.

LEARNING POLICY

The philosophy behind our whole school approach is embedded in the Learning Policy.

'Management of learning is a complex business and requires deliberate and purposeful action. It needs to be planned in such a way that it becomes part of the teacher's life.'

Over the years we had recognised that:

- Best learning takes place in stress free, safe and stimulating environments
- Learning is an active not a passive exercise
- Collaboration promotes learning
- We learn in different ways
- Emotional involvement is important and can be stimulated through role-play, music or film.

It was time to nail our colours to the mast and following the September training day with Alistair Smith, staff were asked to select from a list of good practices in the classroom those features that should be present in EVERY lesson. The findings of the Campaign for learning experiment were shared at this session.

Working in groups, staff came up with a pretty unanimous response. The word 'every' had given considerable food for thought and cause for debate.

The following were selected and located in the preamble to the revised policy as a checklist to look for in every lesson.

- Objectives should be shared
- Outcomes should be reviewed
- Variety of learning styles should be addressed
- Language should be clear
- Understanding should be regularly checked
- Work should contain challenge
- Learning should be supported by a key technology
- It should feel safe for the students to feel secure
- Student self esteem should be maintained
- Learning should be embedded with regular review

There were two compromises to the acceptance of this policy. The first is evident in the conditional tense rather than the future tense 'will' and 'shall'. The second was that, although these aims could be shared with the students, they ought not to be placed openly on the wall, for fear of challenge from the students.
The learning policy could now set out key features of the lesson set within the cycle of accelerated learning.

Step 1 Create the right environment.
Step 2 Link beginning of lesson to prior learning in a warm up activity.
Step 3 Give the big picture on what is to be learned.
Step 4 Expected learning outcomes are explained.

Step 5 New information is provided.
Step 6 The students explore through the learning activity/activities.
Step 7 Learning is demonstrated.
Step 8 There is a review of what has been learned.

The remainder of the policy has not had to be updated, as it is still very relevant. It sets out the role of the Teacher as planner, facilitator and guide, and deliverer and leader; the role of the learner; the learning environment; resources management; and ethos. Each section has a series of needs that are expected from every classroom teacher.

The final stage of development is based on the Key Stage 3 strategy in teaching and learning within the foundation subjects. We believed that the strategy should go further than Key Stage 3 and should go wider afield than the foundation subjects. The policy enabled us to make the final modification to the policy by talking of the raising of the quality of teaching through focus, challenge, clarity, structure, activity, engagement, pace/interaction, independent learning and reflection. Significantly, every one of these areas served only as a reminder of what had gone before.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The actions surrounding the Learning Policy were then located in the School Improvement Plan. There were only two objectives in the plan:

A. to raise the quality of teaching and learning
B. to increase student involvement and responsibility for their learning.

All leadership areas in the school had to establish a clear and acceptable action plan using each of the following strategies. This was the hymn sheet from which we would all sing.

A To raise teaching and learning

1 Through analysis of data
2 By monitoring student progress
   - Performance data
   - Book scrutiny
3 By addressing student needs
   - Improved classroom strategies
   - Classroom support
   - Evaluated setting criteria
   - Review of curriculum
4 Through use of ICT
5 By improving student motivation
6 By extending literacy/numeracy opportunities

The leadership group encourages lesson observation as a vital part of raising standards and works a rotation of reviews of departments working alongside the Head of Department. Without monitoring, the improvement and action plans remain a paper exercise.

Since the feedback from the Campaign for learning pilot, we recognised the value of student inputs. We began to build upon this by including students in our review of subject areas. Sample groups met with the leadership group to share insights into aspects of their learning. Their feedback was invaluable in measuring the effectiveness of the teaching. The respect that was built here enabled us to go way beyond the legacy of school, year, advice and health promoting councils. The next move was to use student feedback on key pastoral and leadership group appointments.

This provided the second objective to the plan:

B. To increase student involvement and responsibility for their learning

    1. Within the setting of objectives
    2. Through partnership in learning
    3. In use of enrichment days
    4. By developing personal effectiveness skills.

The school has used its pastoral monitoring role, its tutor development programme and enrichment days to gain a better insight into student progress, attitudes and particularly lacking in many of the boys – their organisation and study skills.

Every student has within their personal planners a chart that indicates their preferred learning styles. Soon to be developed, will be additional guides for the respective styles to indicate best ways to remember, to revise and to make notes. This is the beginning of a learning to learn phase of development.

Of course, there is considerable thought being put into the curriculum modelling at the moment. The 14 – 19 debate and the easing of the national curriculum in order to better serve vocational needs are as loud here as at any school. Similarly, our bid for Language School status has its own agenda for change. However, with the learning strategy, the focus is more on – have we selected the right structure in terms of timing of sessions – both for the day and for the lessons? We intend to listen to staff and students and investigate as many systems as possible before undertaking such a basic change. It lies in our 'To Do' list. Movement to a new school and possible movement to specialist status provide enough to be going on with.

Once we had shared the rationale behind the changes, resistance from staff became less significant. We even managed to remove all unhealthy drinks and sweets machines from the school and introduced free access to water at any time without too many complaints. As we go around the school now, we are able to observe an exciting climate of experimentation. Some of the strategies are already becoming embedded.

Brain gyms and warm ups
Background music
Different furniture to secure flexibility
Interactive whiteboards

And more specifically, opportunities for the kinaesthetic learners to act out their roles and to present to others what they have learned in exciting and enjoyable ways.

LINKS WITH RAISING BOYS' ACHIEVEMENT

A key issue at the school is the need to raise the achievement of boys, as the gap is significant. In order to meet the needs of boys, we have discovered that so much good practice is in common:

- Plan and structure the work
- Build short term targets
- Build on prior learning
- Avoid boring, tedious, copying style tasks
- Establish challenge
- Ensure that there are regular rehearsals of knowledge

And most significantly for kinaesthetic learners

- Provide opportunities to demonstrate learning

We have also used questionnaires with the students to discover their views on the pace, content and teaching strategies of the subjects. These are analysed by gender and take account also of their attitudes to the subject and relative organisational skills.

THE WAY FORWARD

Possibly one of the hardest things to achieve in this curriculum area is the continued momentum. There are only so many inspirational moments that can be provided. In the end it boils down to belief in the effectiveness of the teaching strategies and a will to make them part of your own toolkit in the classroom.

To that end, we have set out our pilot status with the LEA in the Key Stage 3 strategy for teaching and learning by providing time for research. History and modern foreign languages departments have agreed to take pathfinder status. A range of materials has been built up on the school's Intranet and its specialist teaching library. These cover practical activities – as in the games of Robert Powell – and materials using learning styles/multiple intelligences, emotional literacy, thinking and communication skills and brain gyms and energisers.

We ultimately intend to support the process with a full "learning to learn" course that will help students to embed study skills, revision and memory skills, and organisational know-how, led by the teams of tutors.

DOES IT WORK?

The ultimate proof of the pudding is in the eating. For this exercise it has to be seen regrettably in more than the student saying 'I enjoyed that!'

We set out in 1998 when the previous year's examination results were around 48%. Within two years they had reached 68% and by 2002 they had reached 78%. It is incredible how a small research project can grow when you think about it.

Dennis Medway

Appendix A: Learning Styles Questionnaire

MY FAVOURITE LEARNING STYLES

We all learn in different ways and this questionnaire is designed to give you a chance to work out how you learn best. Please read each question and then circle a number 0,1,2,3,4,5 depending on whether it describes you very well (5) or not at all (0) or somewhere in the middle (1,2,3,4). Take your time to do it. Do it with your friends or alone – it's up to you. Remember that this is for you. It will help you understand how you learn best so be as honest as you can!

1. I always do things step by step and bit by bit
2. I know a lot about birds, animals and plants. I can recognise and name them
3. I enjoy taking notes and I am good at it
4. I like to learn by listening to other people
5. I like to get my hands on learning. I like to make things or use real objects when I learn
6. I watch carefully and often see things that other people miss
7. When I have to work something out, I like to ask questions and talk about it
8. I remember things like phone numbers by repeating them over and over
9. I like to use charts and diagrams and pictures to help me learn
10. I can sense when people around me are in a good or bad mood
11. I like to be outside rather than inside
12. I learn best when I have to get up and do it for myself
13. When I have a lot to do I make a list and use it to help me
14. I need to know what is the point of learning something before I can feel interested
15. I find it easier to work something out when I am walking or running
16. I can explain things to people and help them to understand
17. If I am in a new place I am good at finding places
18. I can sort out arguments between friends
19. I can remember words to music easily
20. I can take things apart and put them together again easily
21. I like taking part in games that involve other people
22. I like to be quiet when I am working or thinking
23. When I listen to music I can pick out individual instruments
24. When I look at something, either a picture or something written, I can see patterns easily
25. I am a good team player. I listen to other people and use their ideas
26. I am interested in why people do what they do. I am interested in how people behave
27. I get restless easily. I fidget. I don't like to be still
28. I like to work on my own
29. I like to make music
30. I get angry when I see pollution or the planet being harmed in any way
31. I like to play with numbers. They interest me
32. I think for myself. I know my mind well

SOLUTION

To score look back at each statement and see what score you gave yourself. Under each statement number fill in the score. Add up the totals to give your score in that intelligence.

Type of learner	Statements				Total
Interpersonal	10	18	21	25	…
Intrapersonal	14	22	28	32	…
Linguistic	3	4	7	16	…
Mathematical/logical	1	13	24	31	…
Visual/spatial	6	9	17	20	…
Musical	8	19	23	29	…
Naturalistic	2	11	26	30	…
Kinaesthetic	5	12	13	27	…