

Personal Survival

Objectives:

- To ensure that Subject Leader Mentors keep a 'balanced perspective' on their work, both professionally and personally.
- To provide strategies to facilitate this.
- To equip mentors with the skills to disengage from the school in challenging circumstances and re-enter their substantive post.
- To allow mentors the chance to reflect on their suitability for working in challenging schools.

Useful for:

- Subject Leader Mentors making decisions about whether they have the emotional resistance to work in challenging schools.
- Supporting Subject Leader Mentors who have made the decision to work in challenging schools.

Organisation:

- A range of whole group, pair and individual groupings will be used with input, discussions and tasks.

You will need:

Activity 9.1	Getting a Balanced Perspective Part 1 and 2	Task Sheet 9.1a and Resource Pack 9.1(i) Steve Clamp's articles Highlighter pens	30 mins.
Activity 9.2	What Skills do Mentors Have Now?	Task sheet 9.2a Sets of cards Blue Tak Task sheet 9.2b	30 mins.
Activity 9.3	Common Strands in Situations	OHT 9.3.1	10 mins.
Activity 9.4	A Time Management Activity	OHT 9.4.1, 9.4.2, 9.4.3	15 mins.

Activity 9.5	Continuing Professional Development Activity	Handout 9.5A	15 mins.
Activity 9.6	A Communication Skills Activity	OHT 9.6.1, 9.6.2, 9.6.3, 9.6.4, 9.6.5, 9.6.6	15 mins.
Activity 9.7	A Conflict Resolution Activity	Resource Sheet and Cards 9.7 (i), 9.7 (ii)	45 mins.
Activity 9.8	A Staged Exit – Re-entry to Substantive Post	Handouts 9.8A, 9.8B	30 mins.

Activity 9.1: **30 mins**

Getting a Balanced Perspective Part 1

- Trainer points out to Subject Leader Mentors that an important part of the course has been reflecting back on learning via the learning log. We are now asking mentors to look forward and anticipate what they might be feeling just before they go into a school facing challenging circumstances.
- Complete Task 9.1a (15 minutes)

9.1
TASK SHEET

Part 1	
What do I hope to get out of this?	What might be a concern for me in this?

Activity 9.1

30 minutes

Getting a Balanced Perspective Part 2

- Trainer asks mentors to get into pairs and gives out copy of Steve Clamp's article.
- Participants read Steve Clamp's article – Resource Pack 9.1.
- Participants highlight the positive and negative aspects of his experience with two different colour pens and see which colour predominates.

Activity 9.2

30 minutes

What Skills Do Mentors Have Now?

- Trainer gives out 'situation' cards sequentially. Some may need to be duplicated for larger groups.
- Mentors make notes on the response sheet on what advice they would give about this situation in their current schools. Trainer emphasises that the mentor might be expected to give 'advice' on all of these, but not necessarily to 'deal' with all of these.
- Trainer posts-up around the room the 'situations' and responses to enable all mentors to benefit from each other's experience and expertise.

Trainer note:

These cards will need to be made up and separated into small cards. You will need at least 2 sets possibly more.

Trainer note: The responses should be typed up and distributed at a later stage.

TASK SHEET		9.2A
'Situation' Cards – Exercise		
<small>Trainer Note: These cards will need to be made up and separated into small cards. You will need at least 2 sets, possibly more.</small>		
1. A teacher who does not understand the levels of the NC/GCSE levels.	2. A teacher who does not mark pupils' books regularly.	
3. A teacher who does not understand why they need to plan according to students' prior attainment.	4. A teacher who is unable to identify learning objectives.	
5. A teacher teaching outside their subject specialism and who lacks confidence, even though they are an effective teacher.	6. A parent who is angry because their child has had no homework for six weeks.	
7. A teacher teaching outside their subject specialism and doesn't see the need to acquire new skills.	8. A teacher who had just thrown a temper tantrum in a departmental meeting.	
9. A teacher who has been observed teaching and does not agree with the feedback. They think they are a good teacher.	10. The teachers in the department don't talk to each other.	
11. A teacher who thinks they work very hard for the kids and says, 'what do you expect from children like them?'	12. Students behave worse in your department than they do in the rest of the school.	
13. A teacher who won't give in their short-term planning.	14. A teacher who smiles at you but talks about you behind your back.	
15. A teacher who sits in meetings a never responds to anything.	16. A teacher who doesn't provide enough differentiation for a mixed ability class.	
17. An ECO who is aggressive to students.	18. A child returns from a fixed-term exclusion and teachers won't give him/her a fresh start.	
19. A parent who wants to see you every morning.	20. A member of staff who likes to tell you what the rest of the staff are saying behind your back.	
21. A headteacher who expects instant results.	22. A governor who wants to come into school to see how you are getting on.	
23. A department which doesn't understand and therefore doesn't use data.	24. A teacher who refuses to recognise that they are incompetent.	

Activity 9.3

10 minutes

Common Strands in Situations

- Give mentors time to read what is on the wall.
- Trainer presents OHT 9.3.1 – Common Strands from the 'situations' activity (acknowledging there may be others).

OHT 9.3.1 OHT

Some common strands from 'situations' activity

- Time management issues
- Professional development issues
- Communication issues
- Conflict issues

Activity 9.4

10 minutes

A Time Management Activity – Managing Paperwork

Trainer notes: Use OHTs as a prompt for a directed discussion.

OHT 9.4.1 OHT

Common Time-wasters

- Losing things
- Meetings
- Telephone
- Interruptions
- Procrastination
- Junk paperwork
- Crises
- Reverse delegation
- Perfectionism
- Distractions

OHT 9.4.2 OHT

Paperwork Reduction

- Remove name from external mailing lists
- Ask colleagues to be concise
- Return unnecessary paperwork to sender
- Establish a departmental protocol for
 - reading/writing minutes of meetings
 - when to communicate in writing and when to communicate orally
 - how much to communicate in writing e.g a 'box' to write in, use bullet points
- Develop a culture of no response means 'I agree'

RAFT Technique

- REFER it
- ACT on it
- FILE it
- THROW it away
(This should keep us afloat in a sea of paper)
- Make a definite decision and act on it.

Activity 9.5

10 minutes

Continuing Professional Development Activity

To use throughout 9.5A to identify the key competencies needed by teachers in a department to bring about sustained improvement. Also use the *Teachers Standard Framework – Subject Leader Standards* and the ten dimensions for self-assessment and action planning.

9.5A continued	HANDSHEET
KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING	
Secure knowledge of concepts, skills, NC, policies for specialist subject	
Secure knowledge of syllabus / prescribed learning objectives for subject	
Assure basic content development in subject	
Knowledge of how to develop literacy / numeracy / ICT skills through subject	
Understand how teaching the subject contributes to SMSC development	
General understanding of legal issues relating to education (LEA, DFEE)	
Understand health and safety requirements & establish a safe environment	
Identify areas for their own professional development	
Identify areas for their own and their school's policies	
Knowledge of the issues, policies and practice of pastoral guidance	
General understanding of school governance	
Make informed choices of exam syllabuses in subject area	
Take responsibility for the development of literacy, numeracy, ICT in subject	
Awareness of future / potential developments of ICT	
Knowledge of current research, teaching and learning	
Knowledge of the statutory framework for education	
Knowledge of legal framework	
Knowledge of quality provision, effective schools and strategies to improve achievement	

HANDSHEET	continued 9.5A
PLANNING	
Contribute to the creation & review of school aims, plans etc.	
Plan lessons in line with departmental scheme of work (SOW)	
In consultation with team, develop SOW and medium term plans for the department	
Establish, review and maintain departmental policy / practice / ethos	
Manage the professional development of team members	
Undertake financial planning and allocate departmental resources effectively	
Ensure the implementation of development plans in their area of responsibility	
Plan the day to day running of the department	
Plan the staff of the department	
Plan the curriculum in line with school aims / statutory requirements	
Contribute to subject school priorities and the development planning process	
Plan, allocate and support lines of responsibility and delegation within department	
Lead strategic planning for continued or sustained improvement	

PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS

- Prioritise, plan, organise
- Work as a member of a team
- Work with others to achieve objectives of others
- Seek advice and support as necessary
- Make informed use of research/ good practice from other areas
- Contribute constructively to discussion in groups/ meetings
- Manage time effectively
- Identify and take responsibility for own professional development
- Set and achieve challenging goals
- Set and achieve personal aims / direction in other staff
- Manage others sensitively
- Manage change effectively
- Direct and co-ordinate the work of others
- Use personal experience and expertise to influence others
- Use analysis and interpretation of data to reach decisions
- Use judgement to make decisions
- Anticipate problems and work creatively to solve them
- Negotiate and consult effectively
- Communicate effectively to a wide / variety of audience
- Lead working groups / meetings
- Establish and maintain good communication systems with staff

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT, TEACHING AND LEARNING

- Ensure delivery of NC in line with departmental / school planning
- Ensure teaching objectives are clear to students
- Ensure students acquire and consolidate knowledge, skills, understanding
- Use a variety of teaching styles, techniques and groupings
- Maintain pace, motivation and challenge with appropriately demanding expectations
- Differentiate objectives and tasks for the range of abilities
- Provide appropriate challenge, support, advice and appropriate guidance
- Evaluate teaching performance and its impact on student learning
- Establish and maintain high expectations and standards of student discipline
- Sustain personal motivation, enthusiasm and innovation
- Consistently apply departmental policy and practice
- Demonstrate high quality teaching skills and strategies for teaching and learning
- Use a range of strategies to build constructive working relationships with students
- Monitor and evaluate practice for other staff
- Monitor that teaching objectives / departmental policy are being met
- Ensure curriculum continuity and progression for all students
- Ensure implementation of SEN code of practice, in line with SENCO
- Monitor and evaluate teacher effectiveness and ensure consistency of practice
- Ensure effective partnerships with parents
- Motivate, enthuse and inspire team
- Manage curriculum design and implementation
- Monitor & evaluate the effectiveness of teaching / learning across the department
- Maintain an environment and clear code of behaviour to ensure quality learning
- Ensure SEN systems are effective
- Ensure that the curriculum provides opportunity links to the curriculum
- Lead curriculum development in the light of changing student need / government directives
- Provide a coherent account of school performance to parents, governors etc.

MONITORING, ASSESSMENT, RECORDING AND REPORTING

- Mark student work appropriately and maintain student records
- Set and monitor individual / group targets, giving constructive feedback
- Implement appropriate NC assessment
- Use assessment / performance data to identify and address underachievement
- Use performance data to report effectively to parents
- Use assessment / performance data to set targets for improvement
- Provide guidance to staff on assessment, recording and reporting
- Maintain and review systems for analysing student performance across the subject
- Use performance data to set school improvement targets

Activity 9.6

(15 minutes)

A Communication Skills Activity(Managing Meetings)

Trainer notes: Use OHTs as a prompt for directed discussion

OHT 9.6.1

Meetings

- Why do meetings go wrong?
- What to do before meetings.
- What to do during meetings.
- What to do after meetings.

9.6.2 OHT

Why do meetings go wrong?

Reason	Solution
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OHT 9.6.3

Checklist before meetings

- Is it really necessary?
- Are there alternatives to meeting?
- What are your objectives for it?
- What are the pay-offs for participants?
- Practical considerations e.g. venue, etc.

OHT 9.6.4

During the meeting

- Start promptly!
- Stop rambling discussion
- React positively to participation
- Avoid interruptions to the meeting
- Log outcomes i.e. action/person responsible/deadline
- Remain positive throughout

After the meeting

- Reflect on objectives
- Were items covered?
- Circulate minutes promptly
- Has positive action followed on?
- How will this link into the next meeting?

Effective delegation

- Be clear about what needs to be done.
- Agree a deadline for completion.
- Let go of the task and trust the person.
- Reward successful completion of the task.
- Don't dump tasks on others.

Activity 9.7

(45 minutes)

A Conflict Resolution Activity

- Trainer explains to mentors that this activity is aimed at exploring their reaction to a conflict situation, which may help them to reflect on their preparedness.
- Trainer organises mentors into groups of three and explains the three roles each will take in turn.
 1. Mentor – giving advice to the substantive subject leader in the school in challenging circumstances.
 2. Mentee – the substantive subject leader.
 3. Observer – to provide feedback to mentor on their skills.

The mentee will have a role card. There are three different role cards – one for each mentee.

The observer will have a checklist.

The mentor has neither.

- Trainer gives out three envelopes one for each 'round' to be opened by each mentee at the start of each 'round'.
- Note for Trainer – you will need to have sets of cards made up.

Role Play Cards

Round One

Role Card : Mentee

You think you are a good teacher. You don't have any discipline problems and get good exam results. It's not your fault the rest of the department are hopeless, nor is it your job to do anything about it. That's what SMT get paid for. You are belligerent and don't see the need for change.

Round Two

Role Card : Mentee

You haven't got around to putting any of the suggestions the mentor made into place. You feel strongly that you didn't become a head of department to do this development stuff. You work very hard providing resources and putting up displays. You are not belligerent, but negative and don't see the need to do any more.

Round Three

Role Card : Mentee

You like the mentor being there, as it seems to be taking the pressure off you for a while. Over the years you have found the best way to avoid stress is to agree to everything and do nothing. You have an easy life in school and want it to stay that way. You are not belligerent or negative but your task-avoidance skills are well developed.

Prompt Sheet for Observers

Does the mentor:	YES	NO
■ Use appropriate language?		
■ Have affirmative 'body language'?		
■ Listen well?		
■ Relate to the issues raised without collusion?		
■ Remain professional?		
■ Summarise and synthesise what the mentee says?		
■ Express themselves clearly and succinctly?		
■ Allow the mentee to talk freely without dominating?		
■ Talk enough themselves but not dominate?		
■ Move the discussion on?		
■ Make the discussion focused?		
■ Sustain enthusiasm and interest?		
■ Make their point?		
■ Has the mentor organised their thoughts?		

Activity 9.8

(30 minutes)

A Staged Exit – Re-entry to Substantive Post

Trainer; distributes Handout 9.8A, 9.8B

Trainer Notes: Use handout 9.8A and 9.8B as a prompt for a directed discussion.

DO	DO NOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Have a personal action plan – with timings. ■ Keep a record about questions to ask about your substantive post. ■ Keep a contact with your substantive post, e.g. through the occasional visit and newsletters. ■ Make tasks time-bound so when you leave there is nothing left to do. ■ Plan your exit strategy from Day 1. ■ Take a portfolio of teaching activities to leave in the school. ■ Start planning to make the substantive subject leader self-sustaining from Day 1 and put it in the action plan. ■ Assume that the department will regard you as an expert. ■ Set up a debriefing session with the SMT. ■ Set up a re-entry interview with your SMT. ■ Visit beforehand. ■ Be aware that preconceptions may not match reality. ■ Give yourself time for reflection. ■ Be flexible, robust and confident. ■ Be aware of your emotional resilience. ■ Network with others in same situation. ■ Remember you have a life outside school. ■ Set the experience in the context of your career. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Give out your telephone number unless you genuinely do not mind being contacted at all hours at home. ■ Encourage dependence. ■ Assume you will know the answer to everything. ■ Over-commit your time. ■ Make promises for things you will do when you leave the school. ■ Become too personally involved with individuals. ■ Ignore departmental dynamics. ■ Give too much information and ideas too soon and too quickly. ■ Underestimate the situation.

	DO	DO NOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintain same contact with your substantive school. ■ Acknowledge the success of whomsoever has been "filling your shoes". ■ Be positive about your learning and your experience. ■ Understand that things will have moved on. ■ Understand that things might not have moved on as much as you hoped. ■ Understand your classes may not have missed you as much as you have missed them (or conversely). ■ Expect to spend some time re-connecting and collating your resources and re-establishing classroom routines. ■ Ask your substantive school to keep some records for you. ■ Establish a protocol for re-entry e.g. when to visit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Be resentful about successes that have happened during your absence. ■ Underestimate the amount of change you will have to adapt to. ■ Expect the same "adrenalin buzz" you had on your secondment. ■ Expect change in your substantive school to be as fast as in your seconded school. ■ Patronise. ■ Expect to be so central in the management of change. 	

Part 1	
What do I hope to get out of this?	What might be a concern for me in this?

RESOURCE 9.1(I)

During the academic year 1999-2000 Steve Clamp was seconded to a “special measures” secondary school. His brief as “Communications Manager” was to help raise literacy standards across the school and to lead the Communications Faculty – an amalgamation of the English and Modern Foreign Languages departments.

A Tale of Two Emotions

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....”

WHY?

Why would anyone volunteer to work in a school that is deemed to be failing?

Why choose to increase your workload, raise your stress levels and set yourself up for potential failure? Why do it?

The question is an understandable one and one I frequently asked myself during the past year!

The pat answer is that you choose to go into a school that is in special measures because you want a new and significant challenge and I believe you can help to make a difference. You want to work with colleagues to raise standards and improve opportunities for those whose education is being damaged by an under-performing school.

This is not meant to be careerist smooth talk but I have to admit that it does make me sound like some sort of missionary, and I definitely do not want to do that. It is certainly not how I want now, or wanted back in September 1999, to be seen by the staff at Flossiemill Community School.

I have always had real problems with the notion of the “super-teacher” – doubtless because I often feel anything but “super”. Such a term is patronising and unfair on those colleagues who you join in the “failing” school, many of whom are seasoned professionals with capabilities similar to your own. So I was concerned, very concerned, about how I would be perceived by staff.

I need have had no worries. Staff made me very welcome from day one. I was there to help and that was enough for them. No suspicion, no secret desire for some prima donna to “fall”. I got closer, quicker to my Flossiemill colleagues than in any previous job. Comradeship, vital, valued, at times joyful comradeship, becomes second nature when you are framed together in the inspection searchlight.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE SCHOOL

Flossiemill Community School is an 11-16 comprehensive school that serves former mining villages.

The school is much smaller than other schools. There are 24 teaching staff and 6 Learning Support Assistants. Student numbers in 1999 were 390. In 1995 the school roll had been 547. Surrounded by popular neighbouring secondary schools Flossiemill's intake is constantly at risk of being squeezed.

At 25.1% the percentage of students identified as having special educational needs is above the national average and the 7.7% of students who have statements is well above the national average. Student attainment for both boys and girls was well below the national average at the end of both KS3 and KS4. (Information taken from school's Panda Report 1999).

The number of youngsters eligible for free school meals is also above the national average. Non-standard family patterns are common. Wage rates in the area are low and there are high levels of unemployment especially in some catchment villages where the level is twice the county average. A number of the school's feeder primaries are also "schools in difficulty".

This rather dank background information, vital though it is to understanding the school's circumstances and needs, has to be warmed by personal comment about the nature of the intake.

Whilst a number of the students are very challenging the vast majority of youngsters are, to quote HMI, "biddable". Once their confidence has been won they are co-operative and positive. Enthusiasm for formal schoolwork is more evident amongst girls but is far from absent in many boys. There is a tangible love of drama, dance, music and sport. As learners they have real potential and many can and do achieve well. Of course these comments are somewhat subjective. They are also generalisations. But I would contend that they are generalisations that have substance. This school's recent history and heritage can be described as troubled. In September 1998 LEA school amalgamation plans threatened closure. These proposals were successfully opposed but following an Ofsted inspection visit in November 1998 the school was placed in special measures.

Ofsted put forward five key issues they required addressing. The school was required to raise student attainment, raise literacy and numeracy standards, improve the quality of teaching and learning, improve leadership and management and improve student attendance.

In April 1999 an experienced, hard-working and dynamic head was appointed to raise standards to get the school out of special measures.

In September 1999 I joined the school on an LEA secondment from my substantive post as Head of English at a successful medium 11-16 comprehensive school.

PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS, PROBLEMS

My role as Communications Manager had two main strands. The first was to manage the Communications Faculty (an amalgamation of English and Modern Foreign Languages). The second was to encourage and co-ordinate whole school literacy initiatives. Literacy was an area of weakness that had been highlighted by Ofsted and consequently was one that was being closely scrutinised by HMI in their monitoring visits.

Within the Communications Faculty morale was low. There had been a history of inadequate levels of support, guidance and training. Contact with the outside educational world had been minimal. Isolationist working was common. Good ideas were present but had rarely been shared across the faculty. The sound of hatches being battened down is probably a common sound as morale falls and schools flounder into failure. An individual approach to planning and delivery led to a very variable curriculum experience for students. The teacher a pupil had would dictate not just how but what they were taught.

The importance of team working and the crucial idea that most solutions in schools can only be found through collective action was poorly understood. Poor team working can be seen as a factor that had damaged the quality of teaching and learning within the faculty. Both Ofsted and HMI assessed much of the faculty's teaching as unsatisfactory. Teaching in a "failing school" is, clearly, very demanding. In order to succeed within the classroom I had to improve my own teaching performance.

Admitting my own difficulties and my own need to improve within the classroom I believe strengthened relationships and increased my influence with colleagues who needed support. It helped to foster that sense of honesty and openness that is essential if team working is to succeed.

Whilst I faced some problems in introducing and co-ordinating whole school literacy initiatives much existed in attitude, structure and senior management leadership to assist implementation. Non-standard practices over some key issues such as spelling and marking were still present but were dying out. Key areas and personnel within the school were fully committed to raising standards through adopting consistent and rigorous whole school strategies.

Raising literacy levels was recognised by the vast majority of staff to be vital to the future of the school. A whole range of whole school initiatives such as the use of writing frames, departments taking on responsibility for subject keyword spelling and the use of dictionaries in all classrooms were embraced with little discord. Likewise the

appointment of a Literacy Worker and the organisation of a lottery funded literature festival were moves that had staff support.

Given what the school's staff had endured, the generally positive attitude to change is perhaps as surprising as it is commendable.

Notwithstanding what I have stated above there were, with some staff, problems over what can perhaps be described as a lack of faith and belief. Some had a lack of faith in themselves to perform and a lack of belief in the pupils to achieve.

A problem also worth highlighting is the way the pressures and atmosphere of the "special measures experience" impact on "normal" human behaviour and relationships. Your brain is packed so full of problems and plans that you have little time for idling matters, little time to talk when there is no "professional" reason for it, little time to chat for the sheer fun of it. There is little time for the matter of normality. This surely indicates that "special measures" must only ever be very temporary. For it to be anything other than very temporary is to consign staff and pupils to a life where normality, and that key component of a happy and successful school, fun, are banished.

LEARNING, LEARNING, LEARNING

I sense that I have learnt almost as much over the past year than I have during the previous twenty years of my teaching career. This is not exaggeration to prove a point. Some learning has been the re-structuring of the already received, or the development of the already part received. The key nature of team working within schools and how the more pressing the circumstances are, the greater the need for collective problem solving and working practices. The importance of regular formal and informal communication. The need for openness in that communication. The vital role this plays in building trust and raising morale. The way in which an individual teacher's emotional resilience – the essential for survival in a "special measures school" – can be aided by strong collective spirit.

I suppose I recognised and subscribed to these common-sense notions already, even if I did not broadcast them. I now feel the need to broadcast them, even if some, I admit, do come close to cliché.

I believe too that my own teaching has improved. I can readily recommend a stint at a school that is "in difficulties" as a demanding and closely monitored test bed for your classroom performance and technique! Be prepared to be humbled though.

Because you have to sharpen up your classroom practice you begin to reflect, analyse and plan in a consistently purposeful way. And as this happens you generate thoughts and ideas that you can discuss, amend and share with others to help raise the teaching and learning of your whole teaching team.

Classroom management in a school that is in special measures would make a detailed study in itself but some of the key points that came out of your own deliberations are listed below. There is little that is surprising in this list. Nothing additional really to what should be present in most lessons in any school. What we are talking about is solid planning and good practice. But how many of us can claim to always fulfil these requirements when we do not have to.

- Nothing can be left to chance – expect the worst and plan for it.
- You need to be clear about what it is you are teaching – and why? Learning objectives need to be accessibly communicated to the youngsters at the beginning of every lesson and recapped and checked at regular intervals.
- Make certain that the introductions to lessons are purposeful scene setters.
- Ensure that the endings to lessons are equally rigorous.
- Always have your resources readily at hand. Check books and folders regularly not just for assessment and marking/encouragement purposes but to ensure that pupils haven't lost them!
- Have fallback materials including spare pens and pencils.
- Establish fair routines.
- Use reward systems constantly and consistently.
- Make sure praise is ever present and always visible.
- Ensure differentiation is a feature of all your lessons. If it isn't you stand to lose the attention of many pupils.
- Aim to get the pace of your lessons right – quick enough to maintain interest, but not so fast that pupil understanding is left behind.
- Ensure the lesson includes real variety through having a range of activities – but if things are going well and the pupils are engaged be brave enough to abandon your planning.
- Do not use ranting as your first response to unacceptable class behaviour – try and control by lowering your voice rather than raising it. Do not lose heart if this does not work!
- Do not ignore the small things for therein lie the roots of future difficulties – respond to them in a firm, fair and consistent manner.
- Deal with individual poor behaviour on an individual basis – when possible preferably one to one and outside the classroom.
- Let the pupils see you are human – try and have something distinctive and interesting but not too risible that they associate with you – but do not construct false personas of yourself.

All of this is of course basic. But that is precisely why I list them. The solutions to problems – in this case how to raise the standard of teaching and learning through good classroom management – are the same in any school. It is simply that in a school

that is “in difficulty” the problems are starker and the solutions therefore require more rigorous application.

This notion, that in a special measures school the factors are more pronounced, can, I contend, be applied to the familiar concentric circles model that suggests that teacher skill, the curriculum, and student teacher relationships overlap to provide the classroom dynamic. I found at Flossiemill that whilst skills were vital for survival, and a lively and relevant curriculum was absolutely essential to bring out the best in the pupils, the element that eventually made the real difference was the relationship you developed with the class. Again this is hardly an original finding. What I did find fascinating was that whilst, in general terms, relationships with pupils seem to take longer to build, once established they are very strong indeed. Stronger, again we are talking in general terms, than may be found in schools that are not in difficulty. I sense that this is far from unique to Flossiemill. Discussions held with colleagues who have worked in other small, failing secondary schools speak similarly of hard-to-earn but strong-once-established staff to pupil relationships. Trust takes a little time to build but once constructed it is solid. The building of trust should be viewed as a pre-requisite of turning round a failing school.

The experience of working in a school that is in special measures has made me reflect on what an “improving school” or a “good school” is. Most of the literature focuses on processes or outcomes. School improvement is the process of “improving the way the school organises, organises and promotes and supports learning” (Mortimore, 2000) or “An improving school is one which secures year on year improvements in the outcomes of successive cohorts.” (“Improving schools” Gray, Hopkins, Reynolds, Wilcox, Farrell and Gray 1999).

For me both these views are too mechanistic and also miss the point. School Improvement should be measured by changes in attitude and specifically whether or not a “learning culture” has become established. Whilst the changing of hearts and minds is a complex matter such changes in attitude are both achievable and measurable.

My own definition of an improving school would be where pupils’ attitudes to learning become positive and where teachers significantly raise their intentions and aspirations for the pupils within their educational care. A place where all, staff as well as students, are viewed as potential learners. Just as it is abhorrent to blame youngsters for failure it is also wrong to blame teachers for their under-performance when guidance, leadership, support and training may have been absent or inadequate. When principles are seen to apply to all it is easier to persuade staff, many of who may have been damaged by their own real or perceived failure, that blaming pupils for school failure is itself both unfair and destructive. The blame culture cuts both ways.

Only when a cultural shift has occurred, when the students are seen as a solution and not as a problem, when staff begin to believe in themselves, and when the school moves from blame to thought and support, can learning flourish and change as sustained. And sustained improvement clearly has to be the goal.

Final reflections

And how is Flossiemill now?

On a Wednesday and Thursday in June 2000 HMI made a further section 3 visit – a visit that can lead to a school being taken out of special measures.

Their approach was professional and rigorous. The feeling amongst the staff, myself included, characteristically swung over the two days from confidence to despair. On the Thursday afternoon we gathered in the staff room to hear the verdict. The head announced that we had “passed”.

The initial reaction of the staff was one of total disbelief. Good news was not something they were used to hearing. Once the realisation that the school was out of special measures had hit home there was, in this order, relief followed by satisfaction. The whole lot was tempered though by the knowledge that though improvements had been made, there was still much more to be done. That latter response illustrates as much the distance that the Flossiemill staff had travelled as it does the distance they have yet to go.

The pupils took, and take, real pride in “the result”. This in itself more than merely encouraging. This sense of pride was most marked amongst the more able older students. There was a tangible relief in going to an improving school rather than a “failed” school.

One 14 year old said in group discussion that “we’ll not get as much stick now from that other lot”. The “other” is the local, “rival” school.

My initial reaction to the news of coming out of special measures was one of utter and blessed relief. When I got home I tried to talk to Alison, my wife, about it but I just ended up crying tears of relief and joy.

Should teachers be subjected to the type of pressures that are ever present when a school is in special measures?

Certainly the workloads and pressures at times are enormous, and both education authority and in-school planning and support *must* reflect that knowledge.

But the rewards both in professional development terms and in terms of personal satisfaction can also be enormous.

Would I work in a “special measures” school again? Like running a marathon when you finish you pledge never to do another – but never is a long time.

Of course there are staff who have given a long time commitment to “schools in difficulty” and not like me, merely on a year’s placement.

Many of these staff are resilient practitioners who have successfully fought against the odds and increased the life chances of many of the youngsters they have come into contact with over the years. These are the unsung heroes of school improvement.

Looking back I see my time at Flossiemill as one of terrific personal turbulence where despondency was often mixed with elation. It was a time when my emotional resilience was tested to the full.

The magic moments were at first fewer and were harder to earn – but the magic was always stronger because of it. Seeing youngsters take a visible pride in a piece of quality creative writing and receiving acclaim from their mates, being awe-struck by the creativity of some pupils, seeing them laugh during play reading and knowing that they were enjoying school work. Taking pupils away on a residential trip and seeing them drunk on the excitement of charging through woods, wading streams and getting muddy. These, and more, are the moments to treasure. These are the real emotional highs, the reward for the periods of despondency, the reason for being there, an answer, perhaps, to why we do it.

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'Situation' Cards – Exercise

Trainer Note: These cards will need to be made up and separated into small cards. You will need at least 2 sets, probably more.	
1. A teacher who does not understand the levels of the NC/GCSE levels.	2. A teacher who does not mark pupils' books regularly.
3. A teacher who does not understand why they need to plan according to students' prior attainment.	4. A teacher who is unable to identify learning objectives.
5. A teacher teaching outside their subject specialism and who lacks confidence, even though they are an effective teacher.	6. A parent who is angry because their child has had no homework for six weeks.
7. A teacher teaching outside their subject specialism and doesn't see the need to acquire new skills.	8. A teacher who had just thrown a temper tantrum in a departmental meeting.
9. A teacher who has been observed teaching and does not agree with the feedback. They think they are a good teacher.	10. The teachers in the department don't talk to each other.
11. A teacher who thinks they work very hard for the kids and says, 'what do you expect from children like them?'	12. Students behave worse in your department than they do in the rest of the school.
13. A teacher who won't give in their short-term planning.	14. A teacher who smiles at you but talks about you behind your back.
15. A teacher who sits in meetings a never responds to anything.	16. A teacher who doesn't provide enough differentiation for a mixed ability class.
17. An ECO who is aggressive to students.	18. A child returns from a fixed-term exclusion and teachers won't give him/her a fresh start.
19. A parent who wants to see you every morning.	20. A member of staff who likes to tell you what the rest of the staff are saying behind your back.
21. A headteacher who expects instant results.	22. A governor who wants to come into school to see how you are getting on.
23. A department which doesn't understand and therefore doesn't use data.	24. A teacher who refuses to recognise that they are incompetent.

Response Sheet

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