

Inspirational Stories of School
Improvement and Classroom Change

We Did It Here!

Brin Best



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Introduction

I first started to think about this book during a train journey across northern England on a grey February day in 2005. I was making my way from my home in Yorkshire to work with a group of school leaders and teachers who had proved negative on my previous meeting with them. Though I always try to remain cheerful in the face of challenges, I was expecting this to be another difficult day.

Following ten years working in the classroom, and in an advisory capacity in education authorities, I've been supporting teachers in a consultancy role for the last five years. I've also been writing about teaching, learning and school improvement, and carrying out research into effective schools. I had enjoyed tremendously my time in the classroom and was rewarded on many levels, but my move into consultancy work had been fuelled by a desire to work alongside education professionals to develop and share good practice more widely. It has been a privilege to witness the work of hundreds of schools over the years and it has given me the chance to understand what can and cannot work in a range of settings. The whole experience has been terrifically uplifting.

So why was I so hesitant about the training session I was leading that day? In short, because I had become rather tired of hearing teachers say 'You couldn't do that here!' Much of my work centres on helping schools to implement changes that enable them to improve and this often requires me to talk about how other people have achieved success in their schools. My heartfelt belief is that we can *all* achieve life-changing things in our schools if we *believe* we can and then carry out creative and determined actions to achieve our goals. But on that February day I was expecting to hear those familiar negative rebuffs when I suggested new ways of thinking and doing that went outside teachers' comfort zones—and I wasn't looking forward to this negativity.

Change and constancy

We are truly living in changing times in education—from advances in ICT that are transforming how learning and teachers are viewed, to the overhaul of the professional roles of teachers and others working in schools, for which we have yet to see the full ramifications. Perhaps one constant, however, is that the teachers and school leaders in our country remain an incredibly dedicated group of professionals in the face of these constant changes. But they can also be a sceptical, stubborn and frustrating bunch of people to work with too. Perhaps blinkered by the constraints of their school, department or classroom—or by the external pressures which affect them—they sometimes choose not to embrace the exciting possibilities of change. When they do this their own well-being and, more worryingly still, that of their students suffers.

I made an important decision as I travelled across England that day. I realised I had to begin another journey: a mission to seek out successful schools in diverse settings and to document their stories more fully. My hope was that others would be inspired by the power of what these schools have achieved—empowered to realise that it really is possible to make inspirational things happen in every school. I am fortunate to have enjoyed successes in a range of classrooms, departments and schools, and have received some awards and other accolades for my education work. I feel I understand quite well some of the factors that lead to success in schools and what others can do to create a brighter future in their own institutions. But I realised that this alone was not going to be enough to convince some people that it is possible to achieve their dreams in their schools too. Instead, I had to gather testimonies from schools just like theirs; from people just like them. And as I mulled over the schools I knew that fitted the bill, I realised that the journey had already begun in my mind, a journey that ends with the book you're now reading.

The scope and organisation of the book

In order to find suitable schools to feature I have toured the country and scoured the literature to find a wide range of schools, travelling to rural areas, leafy suburbs and inner city settings. I was eager to avoid those schools that were especially privileged in some way and have avoided those already well-documented schools that some would claim have an unfair advantage, due to a combination of funding, social advantage or some other preferential characteristics. Instead, many of the schools featured have emerged from *challenging circumstances* to achieve success. Whatever school issues are currently occupying your mind, be sure that at least one of the schools featured has also confronted—and overcome—that issue.

The book focuses on secondary schools. This is not because I believe that the ideas presented here are unique to the secondary phase; instead I simply feel that after fifteen years of intensive work in secondaries I understand their needs quite well. But I would maintain that there are important principles applicable to colleagues working in primary schools too.

The main part of the book is taken up with the stories of a diverse range of schools. There is also a chapter outlining what a range of teachers and subject leaders have done in their own classrooms and departments, plus a chapter on a collaborative approach to education. But I wanted to do more than just tell the stories of these schools—I wanted to reflect on their success and ponder how as a nation we could embed similar success into all our schools. I bring the book to a conclusion, therefore, with two more analytical chapters. The first, ‘Learning the Lessons’, tries to bring together the key messages from the schools featured—my aim is to crystallise what it is that distinguishes schools that are successful in achieving their goals. My hope is that this big picture look at success in schools can provide a helpful framework against which you can test your own ideas and thinking—or even use as a stepping stone for success. The second part of this chapter explores the barriers to innovation in our schools. Here, I explore why it is that more schools do not feel able to embrace

An expert's views

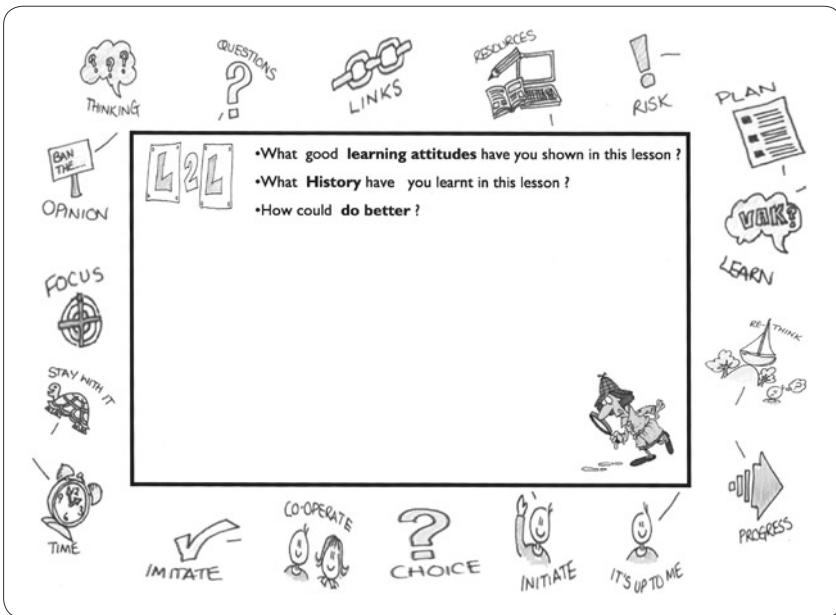
An important feature of the work of the school, already mentioned briefly, has been the involvement of a range of expert educationalists that Andy Raymer has brought in to inspire staff. Perhaps most prominent among these in recent years is Paul Ginnis, author of the UK's best-selling handbook for teachers, *The Teacher's Toolkit*. Paul has worked with staff and students in a variety of ways since November 2004, when he first spoke about learning styles. His latest project saw a team of students produce a DVD on the quality of teaching and learning at the school. This provided an innovative means of focusing on classroom practice that came with a real sense of authenticity, as it harnessed the powerful testimonies of the students themselves.

I was interested to explore Paul's views on the achievements of the school, since he is one of the most active consultants currently supporting creative practice in UK schools, with wide experience of cutting edge work. Furthermore, Paul's most recent book has tackled the all-important area of Learning to Learn, an agenda that Matthew Moss High School has wholeheartedly embraced.

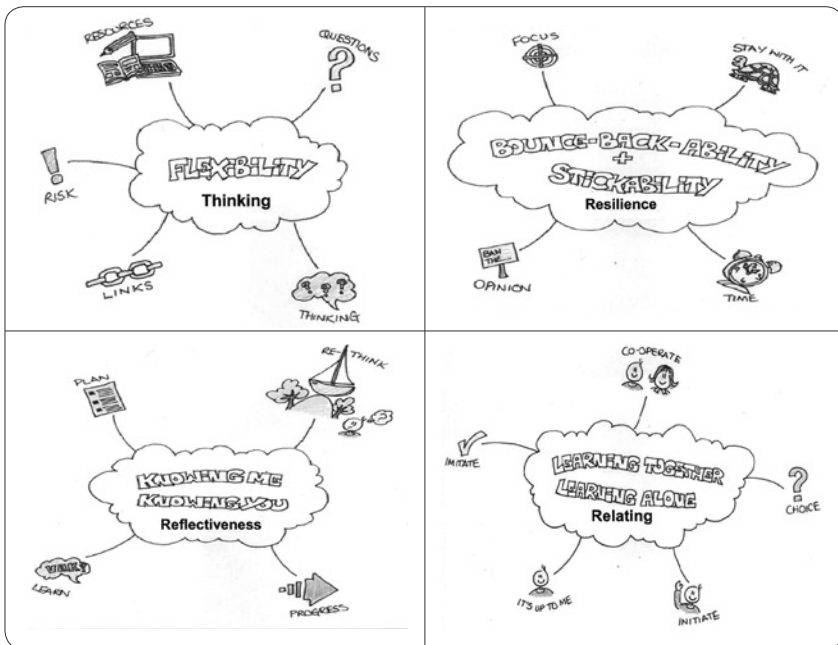
Paul spoke passionately about the impressive commitment of the school to work at the *classroom* level, which he freely admitted began many years before he first set foot in the school. He was quick to single out the key role of headteacher Andy Raymer—someone whose distinctive vision for education and natural reflectivity enabled change to take place when it might otherwise have been very slow to take root. Andy's willingness to ask big questions about *what* the school was doing and *why* it was doing those things was also identified by Paul as very significant. Paul also drew attention to the persistence and determination of Andy and Geraldine Norman, his deputy, who have stuck to their mission 'like a dog to its bone'.

A further factor singled out by Paul is the need for teachers to innovate and find effective approaches within an overall *framework* of high quality teaching and learning. While *The Teacher's Toolkit*

provides a wealth of practical ideas for teachers to try, he is at pains to point out that unless teachers' work is underpinned by a deep understanding of the principles of what they're doing and why, they can soon run out of ideas. Recognising this, I was encouraged to see that many departments at Matthew Moss have fiercely customised their own teaching materials based on robust principles, as exemplified by the work of the humanities department in their own departmental 'toolkit'. In this way, the school is making important strides forward in creating a *sustainable* approach to high quality teaching and learning.



<p style="text-align: center;">Flexibility</p> <p>Listens to others and asks others Use different resources in different situations Learn in different ways ~ uses different senses Get involved. Takes risks ~ might get it right, might get wrong</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Stickability</p> <p>Ask questions Stay on task Overcome disruptions Ignores distractions Get back on task when stopped Get back on task when stuck</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Work in usual settings</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Knowing me ... knowing you ...</p> <p>Share ideas with others Asks as well as listens Takes part Rethinks questions and answers and ideas Knows what is to be done Knows what is expected by others</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Learning alone .. Learning together ...</p> <p>Thinks of questions to help finish task Thinks about the lesson Knows lesson objectives Works in group Works with other children Works on own</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Works in pairs</p>



Students are taught about the language of learning and given tools to help them develop greater confidence

Chapter 7

Stories from Successful Classrooms and Departments

‘If you think you’re too small to make a difference, then you’ve never shared a bed with a mosquito.’ Ken Dunn

Change in some schools is not taking place through whole school initiatives, such as those described in the earlier chapters of this book; instead, it is taking place at the classroom or departmental level. While it is true that no whole school change is possible without a parallel change at these finer levels, there are some striking examples of work taking place at the classroom or departmental level that has not yet resulted in major institutional change. In other schools, it is the combined effect of work taking place at these finer levels that is resulting in the specific successes of individual schools. I want to use this closing chapter of case studies, therefore, to focus in more detail on success in such classrooms and departments.

It strikes me that there are several good reasons for including the stories of individual teachers in the book. First, I wish to acknowledge that success at the classroom or departmental level is possible even if the school is not widely recognised as successful. There is an empowering message here for those teachers and departmental leaders who are creating a powerful impact, but whose work is, by necessity, limited to a portion of students in any one institution. Second, by recognising that much can be achieved at the classroom or departmental level—irrespective of the other constraints facing the school—it gives hope to those who feel that there is a lot still to do to create the kind of school which they would be proud of.

Some of the schools featured in this chapter *are* achieving wider success, built on work at classroom and departmental level. These are included to provide examples of the kind of work at this finer scale that can result in more profound institutional benefits. The chapter also gives the opportunity for individual teachers and departmental leaders to place on record their particular triumphs more specifically, in a manner that has not been possible in the preceding chapters of the book.

This chapter has been assembled based on visits and interviews with a wide range of teachers and departmental leaders in a variety of schools around the country. Some, for obvious reasons, have chosen to remain anonymous here. I begin first with stories at the classroom level and move on to consider departmental success, before making some concluding remarks about what has been said.

Transforming PE

The work of Thomas Doyle (a pseudonym) shows us that remarkable results can be achieved even in a short space of time and with minimal support from other members of your department. Thomas joined his school (a comprehensive in England) in September 2006 to teach PE in a department that he soon realised was simply not providing an acceptable level of education to its students. Low expectations, lack of planning and poor teacher morale had resulted in PE taking a back seat at the school when it should have been a major force. The head of department—recruited internally after the previous post-holder had left the school—had clearly failed to switch students on to PE, and it was seen by many as an excuse to take things easy, even at GCSE level.

In 2006, GCSE success was dismal, with only twenty-seven per cent of students achieving A*–C in a school which on other measures performed higher than the national average. Thomas knew that his experience of delivering high quality PE lessons in his previous school could be used to galvanise interest in the subject in this new setting. In September that same year he set to work immediately with his new year 11 students to drive up expectations and provide

learning experiences that genuinely engaged students. The barriers initially seemed huge, with student behaviour and attitudes being very poor and departmental standards lamentable. He realised that it was going to be a long haul to bring round students—and exam fortunes. Thomas's enthusiasm was curbed further when he realised that his GCSE group had only covered half of the expected syllabus in year 10, leaving him with a huge chunk to get through in the two terms that remained before the exams were upon the students.

Through an unswerving commitment and a tremendous amount of hard work, the fruits of Thomas's work became clear when the GCSE results were revealed in August 2007—the A*–C pass rate had jumped to fifty per cent, a spectacular rise considering the challenges Thomas faced. In addition to a positive student response to a range of exciting new lessons, Thomas believes that these impressive results are in no small part due to twenty out of thirty-three students turning up to special after school revision classes he staged after Easter. What is even more remarkable however—and he would probably be rewarded with a knighthood if the results had reflected the whole-school work of a headteacher—is that ninety-six per cent of his current year 11 students are predicted to gain A*–C grades in PE. This is simply incredible given the department's performance only two years earlier!

I interviewed Thomas at the end of his summer holiday, a time when teachers are usually well justified in switching off from school to recharge their batteries. While he had made a point of taking time out to holiday with his family, Thomas had also been busy marking, and I was intrigued to know more. It turned out that he had been carrying out postal correspondence with students in order to mark drafts of their GCSE coursework, itself worth ten per cent of the overall mark. It soon became clear that this dedication to the role and a willingness to go that extra mile permeates everything Thomas does for his school. The results are equally evident in the high uptake of sports clubs he runs at lunchtime and after school—again a significant achievement in a school where extra-curricular sport has been allowed to wallow.

We Did It Here!

“This book celebrates some innovative trailblazers without alienating the less adventurous. It provides creative ideas broken down into ‘do-able’ chunks, and is liberally peppered with a ‘can-do’ attitude.”

David Harris, author of *Are You Dropping the Baton* and *Principal (designate) of Nottingham University Samworth Academy*

Our current education system is replete with new initiatives, government programmes, imposed targets and national tests. For many working in education today this has stifled creativity, innovation and motivation.

Featuring empowering case studies, this book demonstrates how teachers and school leaders have looked beyond these constraints to create powerful changes in their schools. Many of these schools have emerged from challenging circumstances to enjoy widespread acclaim in their communities.

“Best has produced a range of compelling stories which give detailed guidance on how schools have addressed some of the most challenging issues of today. Each study provides credible examples of actual strategies that have worked. The narrative is accompanied by a range of supportive materials and is underpinned by detailed and systematic analysis, explanation and discussion. A practical resource that allows schools to explore the possibilities of change.”

John West-Burnham, Visiting Professor of Education, University of Bristol

“If I were a secondary Head Teacher I would want to keep a copy of *We Did It Here!* in full sight to remind me just what schools should be about; if I were a classroom teacher, I would want a copy to remind me just why I came in to teaching; and if I were training to be a teacher, I would want it to show me just what I was aiming for.

Prepare to be inspired and uplifted!”

Lyn Bull, Independent Education Consultant

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