

"How Good is Our Ethos?"

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SEMINAR FOCUS An Inclusive Ethos – and that means Everyone!

Please give a brief description of your initiatives which illustrate ways in which ethos can be used as a connecting theme across a number of school activities, such as attainment, achievement, equity, inclusion, rights, health and personal safety.

Inclusion has come to be perceived by many schools as meaning fulfilling the need to admit pupils with particular 'problems', mainly learning difficulties or emotional/behavioural issues. This research focusses on the wider understanding of inclusion, as expressed via eg UNESCO (1994) and OECD (1999) in the sense of how an educational organisation can play its part in developing a service to as many members of society as possible which provides them with equal opportunities to learn to their own unique potential. At the end of the twentieth century, when various commentators were suggesting ways forward for education in the new era, several (eg Handy 1994) made the point that our society could only develop if it were inclusive, rather than exclusive.

It is this belief that requires all educational organisations (schools, colleges, universities, AND workplaces) to see themselves as having a duty to serve the learners whoever they might be.

Therefore, although some schools have already done sterling work in widening their pupil intake, there are a number who see 'inclusion' in this wider sense and have taken significant steps towards becoming a truly inclusive school.

Ethos

In looking at schools which are inclusive and which strive to be so, it became clear that the development of an appropriate ethos was central to its achievement. The values and attitudes embodied in the way the schools operated, in its systems and structures, and which permeated all aspects of the schools' lives, were the main factors in their success or otherwise. 'Inclusiveness' for people in those schools was never a matter of 'helping the disadvantaged' but helping every single person (child, young person or adult) to achieve the best that they could do individually.

Context

A network of about ten schools (of all phases) in a city in the East Midlands of England has been the focus of sustained research for nearly two years. More recently, three schools (two in London, one in Corby) that were externally recognised as excellent 'inclusive schools' have been studied through visits, interviews, etc. As well as their reputation for inclusiveness, they were chosen because they were urban and with some socio-economic contextual similarities to the network schools.

The ethos of these three schools and those of the network schools deemed to be the most successful in developing inclusiveness were found to be strikingly similar.

In one network school, considered to be considerably advanced in its inclusive approaches, in addition to research methods applied in other schools, a number of staff, both teachers and assistants, have been keeping 'learning logs' for a year to date. These confidential logs enable staff to record their feelings about their successes and frustrations, their achievements and acquiring – or not – of skills. These have provided invaluable insights into staff's perceptions and understanding of the ethos within which they operate and which they help to develop.

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Some findings to date concerning characteristics of an effective inclusive ethos

■ A belief that EVERYONE has a 'special' (ie individual) need.

Whatever the personal circumstances, whether of someone in a wheelchair, or a talented mathematician, or a gifted gymnast, or someone with a hearing impairment, etc, etc, the school exists to try to help them do the best that they are capable of. This has implications for the importance of assessment so that this 'best' can be known.

■ This special need is in LEARNING because that is the school's job.

All persons, adults and children, are there to learn and the offering of opportunity to debate and reflect on personal learning is seen as fundamental, whether it is in formal or informal contexts, behaviour management or academic progress.

■ High expectations are central. The idea that disadvantaged people need not be 'pushed' as much as others is rejected strongly. For example, pupils with physical disadvantage cannot be excused any under-utilising of their mental abilities; pupils who find focussed attention difficult are part of assemblies.

■ Whilst routines and procedures are important for physical safety and emotional security, pupils and adults try to see incidents as learning situations. One school has the mantra '*At School, we expect the unexpected, and, where we can, learn from it.*' The attitude to problems is one of peaceful resolution, although this does not mean that very firm measures are not sometimes taken. As far as bullying is concerned, for example, the attitude may be summed up as:

- a) Recognise that it is there – because it is!
- b) There are no bullies, only bullying behaviour. This should – whenever possible – be dealt with as a learning situation – on both sides.

■ While it is clear that no person connected with the school should be disadvantaged because of what may be seen as the 'usual' or 'official' discrimination grounds (ie age, gender, family status, marital status, race, religion, sexual orientation, membership of the Traveller community), it is also held that no learner shall be disadvantaged because of curriculum provision. Thus there is emphasis on using a range of teaching styles, recognition of different learning styles etc. (see Sommefeldt, 2001, p170)

What are the likely features of schools with this ethos?

- ✓ They have a clear and common understanding of inclusion
- ✓ They place great emphasis on the quality of relationships – of all kinds
- ✓ They provide opportunities for ALL adults as well as pupils to learn
- ✓ ALL staff are seen as involved in 'pastoral' work (see Middlewood et al 2005)
- ✓ They are likely to have a strong commitment to 'home grown' staff through schemes which enable adults to qualify via work-based training such as Foundation Degrees, Graduate Training Schemes, etc.
- ✓ Their leaders are people-focussed, role models for learning, and highly visible.
- ✓ Their processes, eg school development or improvement plans, are consultative and 'bottom-up'
- ✓ They recognise the role of parents and others in personal learning

Finally, they recognise that the job satisfaction and motivation of staff lies in the core work of pupil learning. In the learning logs, it is clear how staff 'highs' and achievements virtually all lie in work and 'breakthroughs' with pupils; the 'lows' relate to lack of resources or management inaction. Even when the situation involves extremely difficult pupils, staff tend not to blame them for failures but the systems, or sometimes themselves. It is in **ATTITUDES** that an appropriate ethos is developed.

References

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