

Sonia Turner's Development Work: **Raising boys' achievement through BUG** at Francis Bacon School, St Albans

Sonia Turner was a member of the Teacher Led Development Work group at Francis Bacon School, St Albans (2005-06).

Sonia had a responsibility as Learning Coordinator when she carried out a project to try to engage and motivate a group of Year 8 boys who had been identified as underachieving. She thought that investigating alternative lessons and an incentive system would enable the boys to develop more positive relationships with teachers and feel more positive about their school experience. Boys' achievement was a whole school priority as the attainment gap at GCSE⁵ between boys and girls was 20% in July 2005.

Sonia had taken note of an Ofsted report that advises:

Boys often respond better to lessons that have a clear structure and a variety of activities, including practical and activity based learning, applications to real-life situations and an element of fun and competition. Many boys find it helpful to be given short term targets and feedback that focuses on how they can improve.

(Ofsted, 2003:4)

She could see the sense in this but was aware that colleagues at her school would need support in developing these strategies.

Sonia decided to set up a Boys' Underachievement Group (BUG) that would work on students' 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1996). If it were possible to nurture social skills, self-awareness and motivation this might help the boys to develop more harmonious relationships with each other and with their teachers and lead to improvements in their learning.

Sonia began her development work by working with the Deputy Headteacher to identify boys who had underachieved at the end of

⁵ General Certificate of Secondary Education: examination taken at the end of compulsory education at 16.

Year 7 based on their Key Stage 2 scores⁶ in English, Maths and Science. She also carried out lesson observations in Year 8 in which she noticed a strong correlation between the boys who were difficult to engage, lacked enthusiasm and who disrupted the learning of others and those who had been identified from the data. She also noted that, where there was a greater variety of activities within lessons, boys seemed to be more engaged.

Sonia followed up the observations by interviewing the boys she had identified; 17 boys agreed to be part of the group. In her action plan she noted that all the boys felt negative about their school experience and their own abilities.

The interviews made me more determined to make these boys feel important and give them a more positive experience at Francis Bacon. My aim was to see these boys more motivated, engaged and enthusiastic about their learning.

The BUG group would have one lesson per week. Sonia drew colleagues into working with the group by asking them to teach a lesson and evaluate it afterwards. A wide range of lessons ideas were provided for the group and included:

- a drama session featuring role play about loyalty and friendship
- a session to produce the TV show, 'Who wants to be a millionaire?' in French
- a team-building, exercise 'Desert Island', where pupils had to design and build a musical instrument, a game and an animal trap from materials provided
- a science lesson on fire writing where pupils practised handwriting and spelling
- a communication session where pupils had to guide each other through activities using only whistles and claps

Other staff were drawn into the development work by the use of a reward system. Teachers could award stars for enthusiasm, motivation or positive contribution to their lessons. The star charts were displayed in the staff room and Sonia used staff briefings to remind and encourage staff to use the system. In her portfolio Sonia reflected that not all staff were positive at the outset about the reward

⁶ Key Stage 2 scores: results of tests taken at the end of primary education in English, Maths and Science.

chart, but her confidence in this aspect of the initiative was boosted by a DfES report on gender.

When praise is given it is usually for academic performance rather than behaviour, so if boys are not performing academically, then they receive less praise.

(DFES, 2003:2)

Staff and pupils evaluated the sessions and Sonia monitored the boys' progress throughout the year through the effort and attainment grades system at the school. The majority of boys' effort and attainment grades improved throughout the year. Sonia notes that for one or two boys membership of the group did not lead to any improvement in their engagement with school. Staff evaluations indicate that the boys' ability to work together, to listen to each other and to try different tasks had improved. One teacher noted in her evaluation:

It's really important for these boys to have a chance to be encouraged and supported in an environment where they don't feel the need to show off and mess around. It has also been a great opportunity for teachers to improve their relationship with the boys they teach through the reward system or through teaching a BUG lesson.

The boys themselves evaluated the BUG lessons highly. They valued the opportunity to do active and practical sessions and felt that the focus on role play and team work in some of the sessions had enabled them to find more strategies to modify their behaviour.

In her reflection toward the conclusion of this project Sonia concluded that:

- small, short term targets supported the boys' motivation and engagement
- boys respond to lessons where there are activities for different learners such as auditory, kinaesthetic and visual learners
- an element of competition engaged a lot of the boys
- ICT was an important motivating tool for the boys

Sonia was able to use evidence from her work at a staff meeting in January 2006 to share the work being done and to generate further ideas to engage and motivate boys.

The staff meeting led to the drawing up in faculties of Boys' Achievement Action Plans. One issue of the school's teaching and learning newsletter was devoted to strategies to engage boys to keep the momentum going and to share ideas staff were experimenting with. Faculties have responded in different ways to the challenge: technology and maths have trialled some single sex groups for example. Sonia took the lead on all of these initiatives which in large part grew out of her development work. Her plans as the work moves forward are to:

- take the group through to Year 9 and to set up a new Year 8 group
- focus on learning by introducing a learning record card
- involve parents more closely in the process

Sonia has learnt about the power of teacher-led development work for improving both pupil engagement and teacher pedagogy. Her development work contributed to a school-wide effort to raise the engagement and motivation of boys. As Sonia noted in her portfolio of evidence, schools have a moral responsibility to provide opportunities and a conducive environment within which all children can achieve more than might ever have been expected.

References

- Goleman, D. (1996) *Emotional intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury.
- DfES (2003) '*Key Stage 3 National Strategy. Gender: Raising Boys' Achievement.*' London: DfES.
- Ofsted (2003) '*Boys Achievement in Secondary Schools.*' London: HMI 1659.