

## Case Study: Boys' Achievement in English at Newbridge High School

**The issue:** Analysis of KS3 SATs results for English in 2002 revealed that boys at Newbridge were significantly underachieving at L5+ and at L6+. This case study outlines the strategic planning decisions we made and how these impacted in classrooms, raising boys' achievement in the 2003 tests.

The gains made were:

Band	Level	Value-added gain
Lower-attaining boys	L5+	27.3%
Higher-attaining boys	L6+	19%
Middle-achieving boys	L5+	12.2%
Middle-achieving boys	L6+	4.6%

So what did they do to achieve these improvements? Outlined below are examples of some of the strategies they employed.

### 1. Setting

Newbridge High School set their pupils into ability groups based on KS2 results and reading tests, then adjust them if necessary. It is important to 'believe the data' taking MidYIS predictions into consideration, as boys who present as being lazy (but have high MidYIS predictions) can easily slip through the net and end up in lower sets, thus perpetuating under performance.

### 2. Psychological Warfare

Sometimes boys have to be dragged up – kicking and screaming (metaphorically speaking of course) since the 'lazy but affable' option is considerably more attractive and appealing to them. In addition, it is very often 'uncool, square, boffish etc' for boys to be seen to be working and achieving; peer pressure is considerable, boys have to be extremely robust in order to withstand the barrage of taunts and humiliation which they will undoubtedly endure if they are seen to be working hard.

The lazy,  
but affable  
option!

### 3. High Flyers

Put them in the safe environment of a set with other high achieving pupils; encourage them to be competitive – life is competitive. They need to mirror this – toughen them up – give them challenging tasks where they can also use independent learning skills.

### 4. Role Models

Provide positive role models. How many boys aspire to being a professional footballer? How many will actually make it? They have to be realistic – bring in male visitors from the outside world who will model attitudes that are more productive. Newbridge invited law students from Leicester University to talk to 'More Able' pupils – some were obviously inspired by this. More examples of positive role models will be discussed in later sections.

### 5. Low Achievers

A small group of lower ability boys (some of whom displayed challenging behaviour) was taken to talk to a variety of local employers and look at their places of work, this included the Police Station, Vauxhall Garage, Hospital, Morrisons, Council Depot, Fire Station etc. This showed them the range of skills required for employment. The response from these pupils was very positive, productive and rewarding. Former pupils have been invited back into the school to share their career experiences and progress e.g. an RAF Sergeant on leave from Iraq! – riveting!

## 6. Reading Texts

An obvious route to encourage boys' literacy skills is to ensure that they enjoy reading. At Newbridge, they have deliberately chosen a range of texts as class readers which will appeal to boys' sense of adventure and attitude to risk taking, e.g. Machine Gunners, Kensuke's Kingdom, Buddy, Face, Brother in the Land, Stone Cold, Macbeth! There is no doubt that the majority of boys really do enjoy these texts and this, in turn, encourages them to read independently.


### Library

They have also carefully considered the stock in their School Library and have consulted pupils closely regarding their reading preferences. As a consequence, they used an exhaustive list of their preferences when buying in our new fiction range. Among the most popular choices for boys were the Warhammer books, Sharpe novels, Star Wars, Grafix, Terry Pratchett, Fighting Fantasy game book.

A selection of biographies/autobiographies was bought in to appeal to the most able readers which includes Bobby Robson, Martyn Johnson and Saddam Hussein.

Copies of The Times were bought, (which litter the coffee tables in the Library) and teachers have observed that the sports pages are of particular interest to boys of all abilities; others enjoy the main front page stories and a few have been spotted reading the Business Section. The attractive new bank of computers in the Library is also proving to be hugely appealing: time slots are always over subscribed. There is a dedicated group of boys among the regular Library assistants – this also sends a positive message about boys and books!

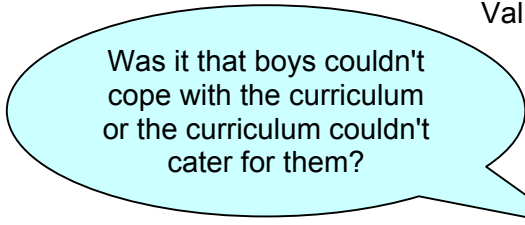
And last but not least..... in order to promote an ethos of success in school, there is a huge SATs achievement board in the Library which celebrates the successes of Level 8 pupils over the last 6 years.



...a huge SATs achievement board in the Library which celebrates successes...

## **Historical Context**

Newbridge High School adopted an 'Assertive Discipline' approach to behaviour modification some years ago when SMT became concerned about the exclusion rate in school. This approach certainly achieved the desired effect of setting expectations clearly and consistently and has been a very efficient tool in controlling behaviour. One aspect of this system was that each member of staff volunteered for the 'Remove Room' rota, to supervise pupils who had transgressed and been asked to leave a lesson. Such transgressions were meticulously logged in the Remove Room Log Book which was a very useful source of data. During one of her weekly sojourns in there, Val Hendry (Head of English) began to sift through the names in the log book. Becoming rather intrigued in this task, she decided to delve further into the mysteries and took home copies of all this data to sift through further.



Was it that boys couldn't cope with the curriculum or the curriculum couldn't cater for them?

Val matched up the persistent offenders with their reading ages and the results were revealing. Boys with low reading ages were by far the most regular customers followed by a handful of 'loud' girls and a small but significant smattering of high scoring, but disaffected, boys. She was particularly concerned that lower attaining boys appeared to be opting out of mainstream lessons, and consequently falling foul of the school's

behaviour systems which could ultimately lead to suspension. Was it that boys couldn't cope with the curriculum or the curriculum couldn't cater for them? A heavy responsibility for the school to ponder.....

Shortly afterwards, in direct response to this problem, the SENCo and Head formulated a plan to completely refurbish the old Cricket Pavilion and take out these 'at risk' pupils, giving them greater attention in very small groups.

Val felt very excited at the challenge of being timetabled in there for 2 lessons per week – but what a responsibility! The group included four Year 8 boys who were displaying a range of difficult behaviour and whose literacy levels were low. She decided to make these lessons very practical, and about their area, informative, using basic communication skills.

It was decided to find out as much as possible about the people and places in Coalville. The timetable operates on a two week cycle. Each boy had a task to carry out in Week 1 which included:

- a telephone conversation to arrange a visit
- a formal letter to confirm the visit – on computer
- faxing the letter
- planning a route, using a street plan
- writing a thank you letter for arranging the visit

Week 2 was the actual visit. The tasks were as follows:

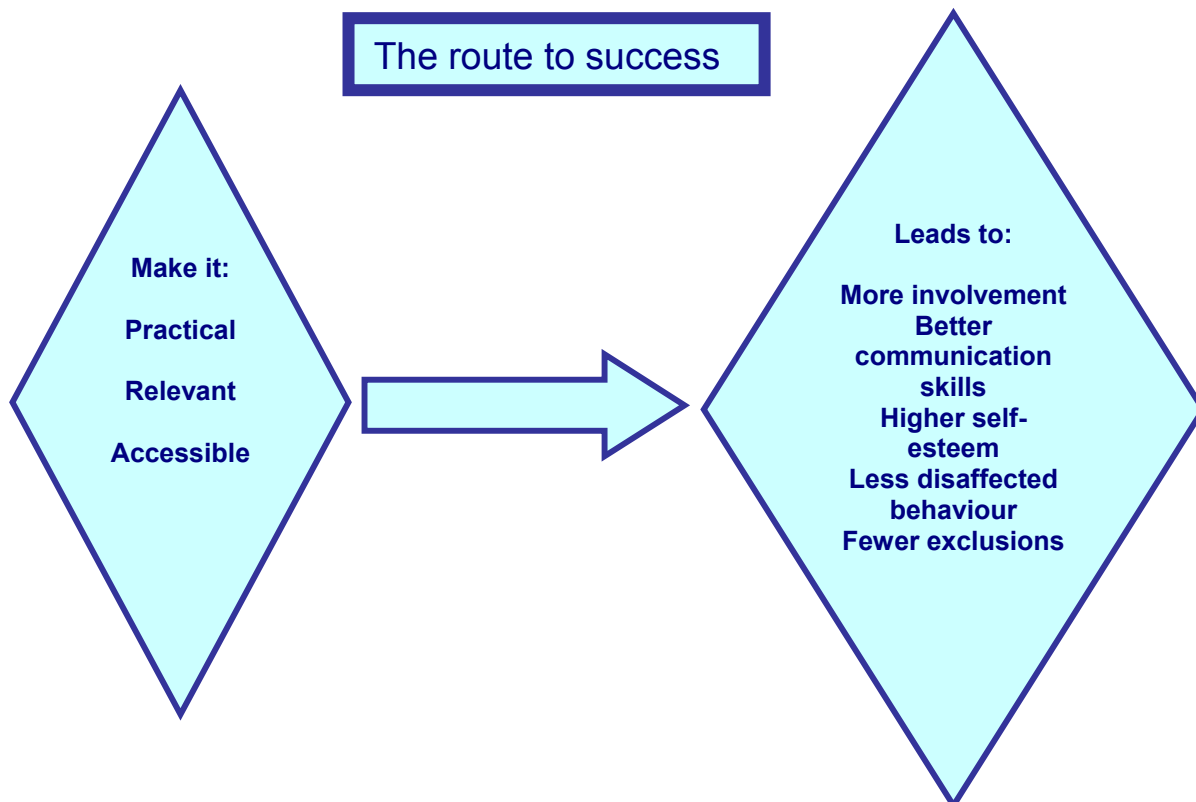
- a greeting and introducing the group
- photographer
- taking notes of the visit

saying goodbyes and thanking the adult for arranging the visit.

The group benefited from a diverse variety of visits including the personnel department at Morrisons; the mechanics' area at the Vauxhall dealers; an archaeologist at the Manor House; the geriatric ward at the Hospital (and clearing their garden); baking Christmas biscuits and sharing them with the residents at a home for the elderly; the Police Station and listening to the Community Policy Officer re careers etc; the Fire Station – using the hoses! – looking at equipment – careers details; the Council Offices – the Council's role in the community – taking afternoon tea with a councillor, visiting the Hermitage Leisure Centre and looking at the facilities; a tour around the Council Depot – looking at the refuse lorries, the parks equipment, careers/qualifications etc.

Both students and teacher learned a tremendous amount about the amenities, facilities and opportunities which their local community offered. All of the adults who hosted the visits were incredibly helpful: they made these boys feel so special and their self esteem soared.

Their self-esteem soared...



## The Present

Data from the Fischer Family Trust (Jan 04) shows the difference in attainment between actual and estimates (using prior attainment at KS2 as an indicator), at level 5+. Lower attaining boys in the school gained 27.3% value added.

In 2003, at L6+, the upper strand of boys gained 19%. These were very significant improvements in value added. Positive levels of value added improvement were also evident in all other boys' categories but not in such significant amounts as the bands above i.e. low and high achieving boys at KS2. Middle achieving boys at KS2 also showed an improvement of 12.2% at 5+ and 4.6% at 6+ at KS3.

In summary, the Fischer analysis confirms that strategic planning did have a significant effect on improving the performance of boys in the 2003 SATs.

2003 SATs results were greatly improved in comparison with previous years, especially regarding the progress of boys at level 5+. Fischer Family Trust analysis shows a value added result of 27% for lower attaining boys in KS2.

Prior to these measures being put in place, progress among lower attaining boys had been a weakness. Therefore, in 2002/03 SMT made provision for extra staffing for the term before SATs in order to create smaller groups and an 'Intervention Group'.

English teachers were asked to nominate pupils who were 4/5 borderline and who might benefit from greater individual attention. Two small groups of such nominees were created – one in each half year group. The groups consisted of different types of pupils – bright but disaffected and underachieving boys; quiet and easily overlooked, pupils with attendance problems.

The team worked really intensely with these small groups which in total comprised of about 20 pupils, boys and girls, from January until SATs. As a result 90% of these pupils achieved level 5 and 2 pupils achieved level 6. The pupils who failed to achieve level 5 from this group also had attendance problems. The majority of pupils in these groups were boys.

It did appear from the results that this 'Intervention Strategy', even on a limited timescale, was very effective in raising standards.

## The Future

### **Most Able Boys**

2003 results at level 6+ showed boys equal to girls at 44%. At L7+, boys *outstripped* the girls by 7%. This year, again thanks to SMT support, Y9 sets were re-organised, across the whole year group this time, in order to create even finer setting. The success of policies for raising boys' achievement in previous years has resulted in a 'Most Able' group in which 2/3rds of the pupils are boys! This clearly has far-reaching implications...

The group, as you would expect, thrives on intellectual challenges and kinaesthetic learning modes: looking at the conventions of speech writing and examples of effective speeches, such as Churchill's; discussing and debating the topical issue of University top up fees; researching the issues in the broadsheets then writing their own speeches; borrowing the lectern and vehemently trying to persuade their peers to their point of view.



A 'Most Able' group comprising two thirds boys!

Another favourite learning experience is mock trials – students love assuming a variety of court room roles and interrogating each other, using literature as the initial stimulus, such as the trial of Father Lawrence in 'Romeo & Juliet'; trial of 'Porphyria's Lover' (Browning).

Val and the department have also looked beyond the syllabus by inviting a famous author into school (expensive but very much worth it!) to inform pupils about the techniques involved in writing a best selling children's novel. This was followed up by a series of writing workshops in the computer suite where the most able pupils from Years 7, 8 and 9 met after school to write their own novels. Again, boys were in the majority in this group.

The challenge which this group has set for itself this term is to produce 'Blitz' magazine written by pupils, for pupils. The 'editorial group' (five Year 9 boys), after an initial discussion with teachers regarding how to set up such a project, has completely taken over the project and has taken the initiatives by independently,

- producing and analysing a pupil questionnaire on what pupils want in such a magazine
- estimating costs
- liaising with staff regarding publicity/printing/editorial time
- arranging adverts/information/application forms/interviews for potential contributors
- creating an associated website with the intention of encouraging pupils from feeder primary schools to log on and enjoy it
- encouraging more able Year 7 and 8 pupils to 'work shadow' them so that the magazine, if successful, can carry on after they have transferred to the Upper School
- evaluating the first edition and made improvements for issue no. 2.

### **In short**

**Boys from all ability ranges pose different challenges in terms of achievement. Experiences have shown following strategies to be successful:**

1. Provide plenty kinaesthetic activities: boys definitely respond to these.
2. Choose class readers which appeal to boys – buy inspection copies and ask pupils to review them before buying.
3. Carefully choose Library stock and use boy Library assistants.
4. Encourage creativity and initiative with high ability boys.
5. Look at intervention group – a well-timed group will pay dividends.
6. Celebrate boys' successes – Boffs rule OK?
7. Use the right role models.
8. Don't allow bright boys to opt out – pester them until they give in!
9. Give lower ability boys practical, relevant literacy activities.
10. Engender high expectations across the board!

### **Questions arising:**

- If the Intervention Group had been established earlier, would results have been better?
- Since boys and girls respond to different teaching and learning styles – should they be taught separately?
- Can schools afford the extra staffing in Year 9? Use of Booster money for a short timescale?
- Should schools constrain their Most Able pupils by focussing exclusively on SATs related revision/activities? Or should they look for more challenging tasks?
- Do different teachers within a department work more effectively with boys or with girls?
- Where can we find more good male role models?
- How do we encourage more good male English teachers?

### **Further Reading**

Key Stage 3 National Strategy: 'Gender: Raising Boys' Achievement - Key Messages  
DfES 0487/2003

Ofsted: 'Boys' Achievement in Secondary Schools' and 'Yes He Can: Schools where boys write well'. Summaries of both of these are available on the Leicestershire Literacy Website.

**Our thanks go to Val Hendry, Head of English at Newbridge High School  
for preparing this case study.**