

The process of adaptation undertaken by an English secondary school to changing demographics in terms of ethnicity: A case study.

by

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Introduction

When Paul Grant was appointed in 1997 to be headteacher of the Robert Clack High School in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham he was taking on a school that was in extremely challenging circumstances. An adverse inspection report conducted by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 1995 was a fair reflection of how far the school had slipped in terms of reputation and student attainment in comparison to previous decades where it had been considered a 'good' school by the local authority and the community. The story of the school since that time has been one of constant improvement with widespread recognition of success, however, including the award of a knighthood to Paul in 2009. The school has moved from being one where 21 per cent of students left the school with no academic qualifications, and stories of student disruption and appalling behaviour were common, to a situation in 2013 where all students achieve a qualification, with over 80 percent getting five good grade GCSEs at Key Stage 4 (including Mathematics and English) and 87 students in the sixth form having been offered places at university for year 2013-14. This paper is not an account of that success, however, which has been and continues to be reported widely elsewhere (e.g. Haydn, 1998 & 2010; Woodhead, 2002; Hopkins, 2007; Ofsted, 2009; Mongon & Chapman, 2012; Male & Palaiologou, 2013). Instead this is an exploration of how and why the school has sustained that success and continued improvement since those early days despite changes in local demographics which have led to significant changes in the ethnicity of the student population. This exploration begins with a portrait of the local context before moving on to investigate how and why leadership behaviour in the school has managed to achieve and sustain high levels of success.

The Local Context

The school is a state maintained comprehensive school situated in the Becontree Estate in London Borough of Barking & Dagenham. The borough is to the east of London with a population of close to 200,000 and is most well known for being the 'home' of the Ford motor company which at one time in the early 1950s employed over 40,000 people. The principal reason for expansion of the borough, however, was the building of a huge council estate (Becontree) in the early 1920s in order to relocate skilled workers from the slums of Inner London after the First World War. Sashin (2011) reports that whilst many people still believe that the Becontree Estate was built to accommodate the huge numbers of Ford workers, the development was actually planned well before Ford shifted production to Dagenham from Manchester in 1931. Initially Ford workers were not allowed to rent property on the estate, but when the London County Council later struggled to keep East Enders in their new homes the rules were relaxed to accommodate car workers, a development which started the complementary relationship between the two monolithic cornerstones of the borough's identity – Becontree and Ford.

This history is significant as the population of the borough was almost exclusively white working class, a situation that continued until the beginning of the new millennium in 2000. Consequently the school in which Paul had worked as a teacher since 1990 and took over as headteacher in 1997 was a reflection of that local population and he was often invited, as the school's success became

noticed more widely, to contribute to debates and initiatives about white working class young people. Typical of such invitations were the two seminars run jointly by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2008 and 2009 where he and others were asked to provide views and experiences of how to succeed with such groups of young people. Subsequently the reports from these seminars were reported to Parliament in 2010. Paul's offerings to such events were interesting in that he did not draw attention to the ethnicity of the students for whom he was responsible, instead highlighting the impact of a legacy of poverty and inequality which was endemic to the borough by this time. Changed circumstances have led to Ford reducing its output to engines rather than car assembly, however, with a concomitant reduction in job availability (down to just 4000 employees by 2010) which means the company was no longer the main employer in the area. The locality had become to be recognised as one where there was poverty and a need for social welfare, but with a population that was largely white. It was easy at the time, therefore, to see Paul as a champion of improving the life chances of groups of disadvantaged young people and with limited insight assume that such students were only white. His approach was not ethnically focused, however, as will be discussed more fully later in this paper.

Changing the school – Part #1

Paul was and remains an unusual artefact of the state maintained system in that he moved directly to headship from the classroom, probably the last person to be able to do that in England as new professional qualifications for headship had just started to appear in 1997 when he was appointed. After seven years in the school as Head of Humanities he and his team of teachers had achieved good very good results whilst the school was seemingly in terminal decline (see Haydn, 1998). The school at that time was judged as having serious problems, including low pupil attainment, poor pupil behaviour and motivation, weak staff morale, falling rolls, budgetary deficits and staff recruitment and retention problems (Ofsted, 1995). In an interview undertaken in 2012 with the Deputy Headteacher (who was a pupil of the school at the time of that inspection) the reputation of the school "was rock bottom, I mean, it was terrible, and the school went through its really bad phase in the three years before Paul was appointed as headteacher". Whilst he was not the only teacher getting good results despite the environment, the results from his faculty were outstanding and came to the attention of the governors and the local authority and encouraged Paul to make his application to take over as headteacher following the retirement of the previous postholder. He was appointed and took up post in May, 1997.

After a spirited talk on his first day to the staff on both buildings of the split-site school he set about the task of restoring order to the working environment. This was a combination of student discipline, school reputation management and a close focus on enhancing the learning environment, particularly through improving teaching. Central to this strategy was regaining adult control epitomised by the exclusion of 246 students in the first two weeks. The work associated with this dramatic gesture is legendary with Paul describing the action laconically as "being the only way I could get to talk to the parents". After marathon sessions of discussions and appeals eventually 10 students were permanently excluded in November 1997, with a new atmosphere of discipline emerging that was unremitting in its resolve. In one respect Paul was fortunate with the timing of his appointment in that he had several weeks at the end of the school year to set expectations for the next academic year. The planned introduction of school uniform, for example, was eased by the astute (an attribute later to be applied to many key decisions) use of some of the more challenging students as walking models during the last weeks of their school life, thus popularising the new uniform which was to become obligatory in the next school year.

The reputation of the school was further enhanced through engaging and supporting parents and the local community. Paul and his staff made a point of being highly visible not only in and around the school, but also in the wider community. As Haydn (2010: 426) reports this included Paul getting on buses and apologising to drivers for past pupil atrocities and giving a number to contact in case of future misdemeanours, spelling out the new rules, and standing up to pupils and parents who were not aware of the 'new rules'. The regaining of adult control was thus the first step that allowed teachers to focus on their teaching and within two years success was noted by the 1999 Ofsted report which was almost unremittingly positive and complimentary. The percentage of lessons where teaching was satisfactory or better had risen from 73% to 95%, and was adjudged to be 'good to very good' in 65% of lessons. The school ethos was described as 'excellent' (and the behaviour and attitude to learning of pupils also evinced praise, the report noting that the school provided 'a calm and orderly learning environment' (Haydn, 2010: 423).

At this point, therefore, the school had been turned around and a new regime established of teacher and student discipline to replace the chaos and disorder evidenced just a few years before. As we argue elsewhere, however, creating the necessary change is not that difficult or complicated; it is sustaining that level of improvement that is the hard task (Male & Palaiologou, forthcoming). In many ways, we suggest, the intervention strategies employed in the first stage of Paul's headship were not novel if judged solely on the intention to stabilise the school, ensure a safe working environment and to provide planned learning opportunities that at least matched basic expectations of government inspection agencies. They are myriad examples of headteachers who have effected 'turn-round' strategies, but very few examples where they have continued to build on that initial intervention to sustain and extend the improvement process. What has been seen since those early days suggest that a more focused effort was required to move the level of student attainment and achievement beyond 'satisfactory' to the high and still improving levels witnessed today.

Changing the school – Part #2

From an examination of the data we have collected from over 50 interviews we have conducted between 2012 and 2014 in Robert Clack School with Paul, as headteacher, other senior leaders, governors, teaching staff, support staff, students, local authority officers and parents we have been able to identify six features of leadership activity which have sustained and extended the impact made by the initial intervention strategies:

1. Establishing a success culture
2. Managing external expectations and demands
3. Selection and induction of staff
4. Establishing and maintaining a robust supportive environment
5. Effective internal relationships
6. Headteacher leadership style. (Male & Palaiologou, forthcoming).

The most important feature of this process, now in its 18th year, has been consistency of purpose in relation to the effective implementation of core (and shared) values. His declaration that "if these children have been let down that's a disgrace, it's outrageous" sums up his philosophy underpinning the route to improvement.

The components we list above as major contributing factors to the sustained and continuing success of the school are mirrored in other research (e.g. Pennell & West, 2003; Hopkins, 2007; Mongon & Chapman, 2008; Ofsted, 2008;), but unlike those studies these factors transcend issues

solely related to white working class young people. The leadership style exhibited within the Robert Clack School can be considered as inclusive in the truest sense of the word and based on sound principles and practice that are transferable to other cultures and ethnicities. Earlier work in the field of educational leadership that made a difference identified similar behaviours amongst some headteachers who were labelled ‘maverick’, yet nevertheless achieved results that were beyond expectations (Hay Group, 2012). In a later work Mongon and Chapman (2012) extended their work on white working class young people to schools they considered as demonstrating ‘high leverage’ leadership and applied the three ‘intelligences’ they had identified in 2008 which were needed to enculture success: contextual, professional and social intelligence:

1. *Contextual intelligence*: These leaders show a profound respect for the social context they are working in without ever patronising it. They have deliberately chosen to work in these places.
2. *Professional intelligence*: These leaders are very good at their core business: leadership and management to nurture the teamwork on which the school’s excellent standards of teaching and learning are dependent.
3. *Social intelligence*: These leaders appear to be sensitive to the emotional state of their pupils and colleagues and use that to guide their own thoughts and actions. In turn, they are deeply admired across their staff and student body. (NUT, 2008: 10)

Perhaps not surprisingly Robert Clack School was one of the study schools which was considered to be exhibiting ‘high leverage leadership’, an approach to school leadership which draws on the analogy offered by Archimedes that with a long enough lever, and a place to stand, he could move the earth. Mongon & Chapman (2012) argue that high-leverage leaders hypothetically might stand at a distance and apply a massive effort against an inert weight – in their case, ‘the school’ - to not only address short term issues, but also to invest in long term capability. The school leaders they examined were uncommonly powerful in this respect and were frequently to be found in areas where there are a disproportionate number of socio-economically disadvantaged families.

The School Changes

As has been discussed above, the school continued to improve beyond what could be reasonably expected from the stabilisation achieved from the early interventions in the late 1990s. Student outcomes on standard examinations have continued to rise and to a level far above performance normally anticipated from the student profile on entry to the school (see Table 1, below). When judging against GCSE results at the end of compulsory schooling (i.e. at age 16 years) it can be seen, for example, that all students had achieved at least one pass by the year 2000 and by 2011 there was universal success in five subjects. Ofsted inspections during the first decade of the century graded the school as outstanding and by 2009 the school was featured as one which was “chosen from the small number nationally that have been judged outstanding in two or more inspections, which serve disadvantaged communities and which have exceptionally good results”, thus deemed to be “excelling against the odds” (Ofsted, 2009). What is intriguing, however, is that during the same decade the school population changed dramatically and by the national census of 2011 was no longer populated almost entirely by students from white working class backgrounds.

Unlike some other schools which changed their school population in search of success, the Robert Clack School continues to serve its immediate local community. With a catchment area of just 1.3 square miles the school has an intake of 300 per year and a sixth form of 380 students in 2012, giving a total population of 1852 students and making it one of the biggest schools in the country. The school received over 900 statements of preference (combined first and second choices) from

parents and guardians which compares dramatically with the popularity of the school in 1997 when they received only 109 such preferences. Admission criteria are so tight that apart from having a sibling in the school the only other realistic chance of getting admitted is proximity. This is an area of London which still demonstrates high levels of poverty, however, but is one which has changed significantly in terms of ethnicity during the current century.

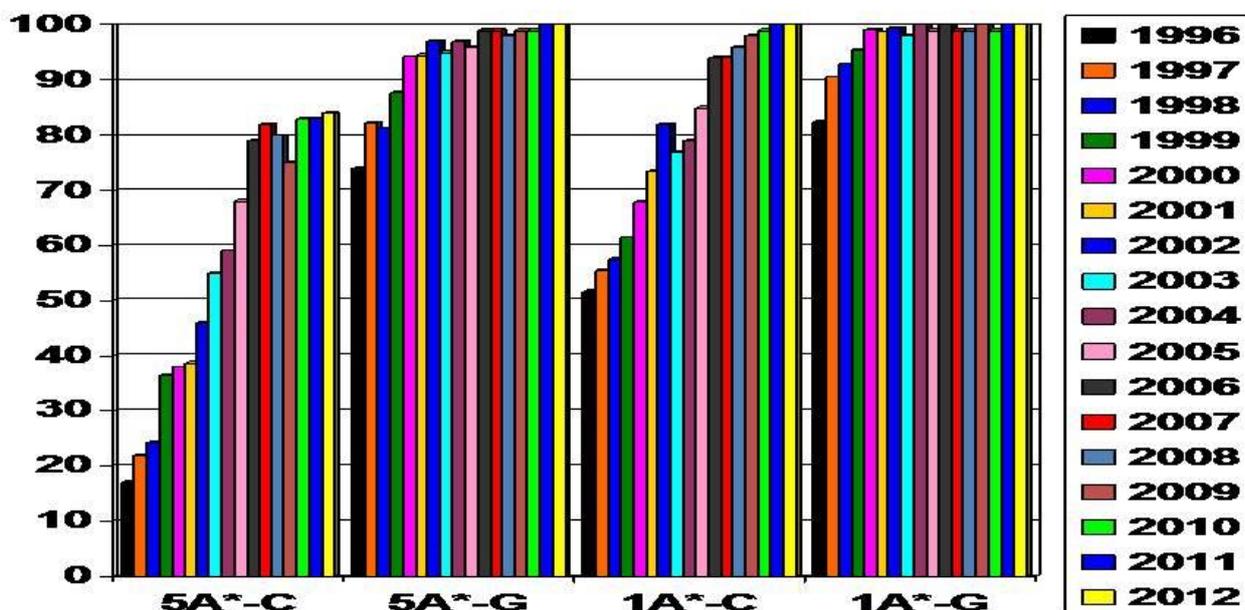


Table 1: Student outcomes for GCSE results 1996 - 2012

As can be seen from Table 2, below, the White British population fell from 81 per cent to less than 50 per cent during the period leading up to the national census of 2011, with large increases in the proportion of Other White (typically East European) and other ethnic groups. Interestingly the ethnic mix of the local population now brings it much more in line with the rest of London, but the difference is dramatic in terms of the local community. Barking and Dagenham remains an area of poverty, however, and currently ranks amongst the four lowest London boroughs in 10 of the 21 indicators and is considered to be getting 'slightly worse' according to the data presented by the National Policy Institute (2013). In other words whilst the mix of the population has changed there are similar social challenges as experienced by previous generations.

In explaining the reasons for increased diversity in the local population one of the governors, also a local authority planning officer, described in one of the interviews we conducted how the borough had gone from having one of the highest proportions of people in their 80s to a much younger population. In many instances their council tenancy has disappeared into the buy to let market which, he calculates, means some 25-30 per cent of properties on the local council estate which serves the school are now privately owned leaseholds. This appears to be a growing market with many owners of previous council properties which they were allowed to buy under a government policy of the 1980s taking the opportunity to sell and make a healthy profit. As the area is one of the cheapest places to live in London there has not only been a migration into the borough from Inner London, but there has also been much immigration into the country of refugees who have located into the area. The consequence, he states, is to see a startling change in the local population:

With people coming in from civil war conflicts in Africa and the Balkans together with the churn that started to occur on buy to let, there started to be a ready market of people who wanted rented property. The number of properties that have become buy-to-let has increased consistently year on year on and people just come here from a wider range of different places, a little rush here, a little rush there. Unlike most of the London boroughs where there tends to be one dominating group from an immigration point, either because they all came at one point or people who came in the first settlement and then other people joined them, here it is a bit more diversified. We have got people from all over the place. Obviously, more recently, people from Eastern Europe [due to economic migration within the European Union], but there's a lot of people came here in 1990 from the Congo and Angola and lots of people from Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo who came around the time of the Balkan War. Consequently there isn't one dominating group, it is quite a mix of people from all over the place. (Governor, Robert Clack School)

Table 2: London Borough of Barking and Dagenham 2011 Census Key Statistics

2011 Census Data	LBBB % increase / decrease	LBBB % Population	LBBB % Population	London % Population	England % Population
Ethnic Groups		2011	2001	2011	2011
White British	-30.64%	49.46%	80.86%	44.89%	79.75%
White Other	234.06%	7.81%	2.65%	12.65%	4.58%
Mixed / multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean	87.96%	1.44%	0.87%	1.46%	0.78%
Mixed / multiple ethnic groups: White and Black African	272.03%	1.14%	0.35%	0.80%	0.30%
Mixed / multiple ethnic groups: White and Asian	133.33%	0.67%	0.33%	1.24%	0.63%
Mixed / multiple ethnic groups: Other mixed	233.64%	0.99%	0.34%	1.45%	0.53%
Asian / Asian British: Indian	102.01%	4.00%	2.25%	6.64%	2.63%
Asian / Asian British: Pakistani	162.09%	4.31%	1.86%	2.74%	2.10%
Asian / Asian British: Bangladeshi	1044.28%	4.14%	0.41%	2.72%	0.82%
Asian/Asian British: Chinese	69.68%	0.71%	0.47%	1.52%	0.72%
Asian / Asian British: Other Asian	485.52%	2.76%	0.53%	4.88%	1.55%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British: African	293.81%	15.43%	4.44%	7.02%	1.84%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British: Caribbean	52.21%	2.81%	2.09%	4.22%	1.11%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British: Other Black	347.09%	1.74%	0.44%	2.08%	0.52%
Other Ethnic group: Arab		0.52%	n/a	1.30%	0.42%
Other Ethnic Group: Any other ethnic group	177.14%	1.04%	0.43%	2.14%	0.62%

As can be seen from Tables 3 and 4, below, the changes in local population are reflected in the school with not only sharp increases in the ethnic mix, but also with a general rising trend of students who are eligible for free school meals (the most common indicator of poverty in compulsory education). There has also been a notable increase in the proportion of students for whom English is not their first language.

Table 3 - Basic Characteristics by National Curriculum Year Group

NC Year Group	Number on roll	% Boy/Girl	% Free School Meals*	% Minority Ethnic Group	% 1 st language not English	% Special Education Needs	Children looked after
7	301	48.5/51.15	44.9	59.3	36.9	15.3	3
8	298	50.0/50.0	47.7	45.9	29.2	17.1	3
9	296	51.7/48.3	43.6	44.9	29.3	17.9	2
10	295	54.6/45.4	40.0	38.1	24.5	24.1	0
11	282	55.7/44.3	33.3	33.0	25.3	23.8	1
Post-compulsory	380	50.8/49.2	-	30.8	22.4	23.2	0

Source: Ofsted (2013): RAISEonline 2013 Summary Report

[* The categorisation of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) changed in 2012. Pupils are classed as FSM if they have been eligible for and claiming FSM at any time in the last 6 years].

Table 4: Ethnic Groups and English as a first language

Ethnic Group	School %			National %
	2011	2012	2013	2013
White				
British	69.1	64.3	56.9	72.7
Irish	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.3
Traveller of Irish heritage	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
Romany or Gypsy	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.2
Any other white background	4.3	6.5	8.4	4.3
Mixed				
White & Black Caribbean	1.8	2.2	1.9	1.4
White & Black African	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.5
White & Asian	0.2	0.2	0.4	1.0
Any other mixed background	0.9	1.0	1.2	1.6
Asian or Asian British				
Indian	1.1	1.3	1.7	2.6
Pakistani	0.7	1.0	1.7	3.9
Bangladeshi	1.8	2.5	2.7	1.6
Any other Asian background	0.7	1.0	1.2	1.6
Black or Black British				
Caribbean	2.7	2.4	2.5	1.3
African	13.1	13.5	15.3	3.3
Any other Black background	1.8	2.0	2.0	0.6
Chinese	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.4
Any other ethnic group	0.7	0.5	1.0	1.5
Parent/Pupil preferred not to say	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.5
Ethnicity not known	0.3	0.5	2.3	0.4
First language				
English	78.4	76.2	70.1	83.9
Other	21.0	23.3	26.9	16.9
Unclassified	0.5	0.5	3.0	0.2

Source: Ofsted (2013): RAISEonline 2013 Summary Report

Discussion

As indicated above we have undertaken extensive research into the school which not only includes the large number of interviews, but also includes reviews of documentation such as Ofsted reports, internal documentation, press cuttings and correspondence between a parent governor and the previous headteacher. During that investigation the issue of ethnicity has only ever come up once when a parent governor, also employed as a student counsellor in the school and himself Black British, talked about the zero tolerance policy the school has to gangs (which in London are typically associated with Black youths). His description of the approach is:

One of my other roles is gang prevention, which is unusual. I don't know of any other school that does exactly what I do. Most schools don't have someone like me, but when kids get in trouble outside with the police we get told about it and if it's gang-related we'll isolate them, take out of the normal programme and they do their lessons with me. You can go to some of the schools and see evidence of gangs because even if they're in uniform they'll have the same haircut, or they'll have a tick shaved into their hair. In our school if there's any ticks we order them to cut it out and tell them "If you can't cut it out you're in isolation 'til it's done". It seems really extreme but it works. In some other some other schools they've all got a tick and it's intimidating. I've been to other schools and thought, "Don't you notice that?" and teachers don't know what I'm talking about. It's, "As long as it doesn't happen in school it's nothing to do with us". We take the view "Well actually we're a community and as long as you come to the school what you do outside affects the school and the reputation of the school", so we're interested in everything.

This was the only evidence we saw, however, of the school seeking to disassociate the internal environment from the mores of the wider local community. In general the culture of the school was to value all members of the student population and to celebrate their success, regardless of gender, ethnicity, creed or social status. As a Year 12 member of the School Council indicated:

They only want the best for us. That's the way I think everyone looks at it. No matter what they say to you, you know that they only want the best for you and they want you to do as well as you possibly can, because they know you're capable.

Paul's determination to change the aspirations of the community was clear from the outset of his career as headteacher with the statement "forget where we are, we're going to do well" thus, according to the Assistant Headteacher, "creating expectations that the staff place on the pupils not being affected by the area in which our school's based". This view was echoed by a Year 13 student from the School Council who pointed out that "we were voted like one of the worst places to live in the UK, it doesn't take away from how well this school does in trying to address those social issues" and summed up by a parent governor as:

It is all about achieving and just giving them a different view of themselves. Coming from like a deprived borough we don't use that as an excuse and we wouldn't let anybody hide behind that.

In short, therefore, the title of this paper is inaccurate. The school did not adapt to changing demographics, it merely continued to espouse and enact the same core value base that drove improvement from the beginning of Paul's tenure as headteacher in 1997. Students are valued, trusted and encouraged to achieve (and not just in terms of examination results). The school has an outstanding record of achievement in many other ways and students enter the next phase of their lives with a sense of expectation and belief in themselves that transcends the social setting in

which the school is located. The last word in this success story goes to a student leaving the school at the end of 2013 to take up a university place in the USA:

Robert Clack School instils a sense of sort of appreciation for the differences in society, but also it sort of shows you a way forward in order to be successful in wider society, not just academically, not just sort of in traditional school ways.

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