

SUMMARY

RHINOs: Really Here In Name Only

A Research Project About Quietly Disaffected Pupils

Using Research and Evidence to Improve Teaching and Learning

AIMS

The object of this research was the examination of disaffection among a group of pupils attending Sprowston High School in Norwich. The pupils in question were given the name RHINOs which stood for Really Here In Name Only. Because the group in question did not disrupt lessons in an overt way, or break the school's basic conventions, their disaffection was not immediately apparent. In fact, although most teachers felt that there were pupils fitting this description in almost all classes, evidence for their existence was purely anecdotal. The enquiry sought to identify such pupils, to examine their learning and motivation, and to explore intervention strategies that could enhance their experience of school.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

RHINOs were a real phenomenon and it was possible to identify them through careful observation;

These underachieving children suffered badly in a poor learning environment because:

- they were anonymous in a noisy class, getting little teacher attention if other more actively disruptive pupils were allowed to dominate;
- they were bored by uninspiring material as it robbed them of the opportunity to express their creativity;
- they responded well to teachers who were interested in them and who had time to help them, but they rejected others who just go through the motions of teaching;
- they were individuals in a large organisation, who found it hard to gain attention;
- they were unaware of career opportunities although they had an idea that they needed to do well at school to get a good job;

Traditional school reporting methods were not effective in identifying RHINOs;

While it was possible to intervene to counteract 'rhinoism' each individual pupil required a different set of strategies.

CONTEXT

Sprowston School has 1,400 pupils in Years 8 - 13. The school is on the northern outskirts of Norwich, and has a very homogenous population. Although unemployment levels are low, the area is not affluent. The school draws its pupils from Sprowston, the surrounding countryside and the north of the city of Norwich. Intake is just below national average in terms of reading age and cognitive testing. GCSE results are in line

with national averages, although girls rather than boys underachieve compared with national figures. There is a good staying on rate in the 6th form.

THE PROJECT

The research was based on the identification of a small number of pupils whose progress was monitored during the Summer Term of 1998. There were four phases of the research.

Phase One

At Sprowston there is a common marking protocol across the school. All work is graded out of ten. A mark of eight means that a pupil is working to his or her potential irrespective of ability. Students receive 'short reports', grading their performance in each subject. The objective during Phase One was to use the school's reporting and grading procedures to try and identify quiet underachievers.

In the Summer Term of the 1997-98 academic year the short report grades for all 285 Year 9 pupils were examined. Pupils were highlighted if their average grade was between 6.6 and 7.5. This level of performance indicated underachievement but did not lead to formal intervention strategies - for example the pupil would not be placed on report. This initial selection produced a list of fifty-four pupils. Those with a history of disruptive behaviour were excluded, because they did not fit the selection criteria for a RHINO. By this method the sample was reduced to sixteen, from which eight pupils of average ability were selected to take part in the study. Ability measures were based on Cognitive Ability Test (CAT) scores, administered to Year 8 entrants. From the group of sixteen, six pupils, 3 girls and 3 boys, with standardised CAT scores between 95 and 103 were selected. (A standardised score of 100 is average.)

Lesson observations were carried out between 6th July 1998 and 22nd July 1998 to confirm if the 6 identified pupils were in fact RHINOs. The researcher carried out the classroom observations. The pupils themselves were not informed that they were being observed, nor was the class teacher told which pupils in his/her lesson were being monitored. The observation procedure used in all cases was to record the pupil's activities in a lesson, keeping general notes throughout, but also noting the pupil's activities every thirty seconds during a ten-minute period.

The observation schedule was not completely satisfactory, coming as it did towards the end of the summer term. One of the pupils (Pupil One) fitted our description of a RHINO. The other pupils may have been underachieving but they were not anonymous. Two pupils produced work of good quality and were happy to communicate with their teachers and their fellow pupils. One pupil was extremely keen to get the attention of the teacher, while another seemed to have a definite strategy to show her disaffection.

This raised serious doubts about the reliability/effectiveness of the short report system as a means of identifying quiet underachievers, and at the end of this phase of the study we were not still not sure if RHINOs really existed.

Phase Two

In this phase of the inquiry, which was carried out in the Spring Term 1998-99, three further pupils became the focus of study. Two were identified from their first short report in Year 10. Their average grade had slipped below 7.5. The third one became involved because his mother claimed that his science teacher was putting him under pressure about homework. The three pupils concerned were all in my tutor group. Lesson observations were once again carried out using the same protocol as in Phase 1.

I interviewed each pupil as part of his/her preparation for their Record of Achievement. They were informed that what they said might be used in research purposes, but that was

not the main purpose of the interview. Classroom observation showed that one of the pupils had very little apparent interest in the subject and her level of commitment was low. The observer could see "why she might get away with her attitude" because she appeared to conform e.g. she was in uniform and had taken her coat off. Other pupils were much more openly disengaged "talking during explanations, feet on chairs, conspicuously not in uniform - her non confrontational, quiet behaviour looks good".

Phase Three

In this section of the inquiry interviews were conducted with five boys who were identified as quiet underachievers by their English teacher. The boys were all in a top set for English, but on the basis of his involvement in this research project, the teacher believed that they were RHINOs. The pupils were interviewed individually by two teachers. They were invited to take part in the research, and their parents were informed about their involvement. The objective of this part of the study was to find common reasons for underachievement and to develop strategies to overcome these. The incentive offered to the pupils and their parents was that their attainment in English could be improved.

Interviews were carried out in the Summer Term 1998-99. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The pupils were asked similar questions but the interviews were allowed to develop in accordance with their answers.

- All five pupils placed a high emphasis on the social side of their school life.
- They enjoyed lessons in which they felt they were learning.
- Three listed creative subjects as their best lessons while the other two thought they did best in Business Studies and Economics.
- They did not like extended essays in English because they did not see them as being creative.
- Four out of five placed Science at the bottom of their list of preferred subjects.
- None had a definite career objective although they had vague ideas such as "Something in computers".
- All five thought they should be working harder and they were aware of where they were not doing well.
- All five believed that who was teaching them had a significant effect on their progress.
- They found it hard to make progress in lessons that were boring.
- They felt they got more teacher attention in the subjects that they were good at.
- They believed it was important to do well at school to get a good job.
- Two of them felt very tired at the end of a school day.

Despite these similarities the most obvious feature of the interviews was the difference between the boys. In each interview there was a key passage which seemed to highlight the needs of that pupil. All the interviews had a different character, however they all reached a point, usually within 10 minutes, when a pupil concerned started to explain his individual outlook on school. As teachers we felt we had gained a considerable insight into the needs of each child. It was obvious that what was an appropriate strategy for one would be totally wrong for another. For example:

- One pupil felt the need to match the performance of an elder brother, and was subject to considerable parental pressure to do so. Therefore he needed encouragement to see that he could achieve.

- Another was according to CATS (Cognitive Ability Tests) very bright, but his parents put him under no pressure whatsoever. He wanted deadlines to be more rigidly imposed by his teachers.
- One felt very lonely, as his best friend had left him to join another group of boys who excluded our pupil. He wanted support.
- One found the subject hard, but was too shy to ask questions.
- Another found the work dull and unstimulating, he wanted to be given more scope so he could link English to areas he did find interesting. He couldn't see how a play he was studying might relate to his own experience, but had turned off rather than express these opinions.

We realised that in order to improve their attainment it was necessary to provide varied and interesting tasks, to offer help when it was needed, and to spend time explaining what was required. Most of all it seemed essential to spend time building relationships with each individual pupil.

Phase Four

In this final section I attempted to draw the inquiry to a conclusion, and examine the outcome of the intervention strategies that were adopted with the three pupils from Phase 2.

A regular correspondence was established with one pupil's mother. The boy was placed on a report for two weeks, and his homework journal was checked everyday. Teachers were asked to write the homework into the journal. At the end of the two weeks he asked to remain on report. After two months he felt he was ready to come off report. He had become much more responsible for himself, e.g. he brought letters about absence without having to be asked. Although the quality of his work still needed a lot of improvement, he was better organised and usually managed to take the correct equipment to lessons. His communication with his teachers had improved and he had a friendly relationship with his science teacher. His average short report grade improved from 6.57 to 7.67.

Another boy who was interested in creative arts was helped to make contact with a local drama group. Once again a dialogue was established with home, and his mother helped him find a work experience placement with a local theatre. He started to work with a visiting youth group. This helped to help build his self-esteem and he too became much more communicative.

The third pupil proved more difficult. Her short report grades continued to slip although her attendance and punctuality improved and she auditioned for a role in the school production. She also took part in a school exchange to Denmark.

EVALUATION

Despite the small number of pupils who took part in this study I feel it is safe to conclude that RHINOs do exist. Phase Two of the project identified three in a tutor group of twenty-three Year 10 pupils. In the lessons that were observed these children appeared to behave in similar ways, but interviews showed that their motivations for their behaviour were widely different. The findings from Phase 3 suggested that determining each pupil's particular agenda was a key step in improving his or her attainment. The boys in phase three, for example, all achieved pass grades at GCSE. When intervention strategies were adopted in Phase Four, on the basis of such information, they appeared to produce results in a fairly short time.

The most significant finding of the study was how badly these children suffered in a poor learning environment. They were anonymous in a noisy class, getting little teacher attention if other more actively disruptive pupils were allowed to dominate. They were bored by uninspiring material as it robbed them of the opportunity to express their creativity. They responded well to teachers who were interested in them and who had time to help them, but they rejected others who just go through the motions of teaching. They were individuals in a large organisation, who found it hard to gain attention. They were unaware of career opportunities although they had an idea that they needed to do well at school to get a good job.

With the possible exception of one pupil in Phase Three, all the pupils involved were positive in their wish to co-operate. All wanted to get more out of their schooling.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE IN THIS SCHOOL

Individual Target Setting has been adopted at Sprowston as the means towards improving individual attainment. For RHINOs this could be of great benefit if it involves meaningful one to one contact with their teachers. However if Target Setting is allowed to become a

number generating exercise, to be completed by teachers in too short a time span, it will just serve to further anonymise these pupils as statistics of failure.

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