

‘Successful Teachers in Schools facing Challenging Circumstances’ Conferences Report

Background & context

Lancashire Local Authority’s Recruitment & Retention Team commissioned research by St Martin’s College of Higher Education to explore what factors made ‘Successful Teachers in Schools facing Challenging Circumstances’. The research, using schools and teachers in Lancashire secondary schools was completed in August 2004. Schools were selected as challenging schools if they were situated in demographic and socio-economic contexts which were challenging, using criteria such as the number of free schools meals, social and economic deprivation and a minimal level of parental involvement.

Initially a summary of the research findings was published in the Recruitment & Retention Handbook. It was then decided to disseminate the findings to teachers through a series of conferences, using a workshop format, based upon the research findings and the experience of these ‘successful’ teachers.

A further incentive to deliver the workshops was that statistical data on applications , gained over two years, revealed that the number of applicants for posts in some Secondary schools which were facing challenging circumstances was lower than the average. In addition, through working with the DSGG EBD recruitment strategy group, recruitment within Special EBD and Short Stay schools was an issue. This, coupled with awareness that the age profile of this sector showed a high percentage of teachers in the 50+ age group, revealed that there was possibly going to be a recruitment crisis in the near future.

Aims

The aims of the workshops were to:

- disseminate the findings of the research
- present a positive insight into working with challenging pupils, from experienced teachers, with an emphasis on the rewards
- enhance/re-kindle their positive motivation for becoming and remaining a teacher
- offer an opportunity for the participants to discuss with experienced teachers the realities of working in a school facing challenging circumstances and explore possible obstacles and strategies
- encourage participants to consider applying for posts in schools facing challenging circumstances and/or Special schools or Short-stay schools
- guide the participants towards further appropriate courses, professional development opportunities and support to gain the skills and strategies to work with challenging pupils.

Preparation for the Conferences

Two venues were selected, one centrally-located and one in the East of the County. A letter with a draft programme was sent to all Headteachers and SENCOs in Secondary and Special schools, inviting them to nominate teachers who they felt would find working with those young people who may present challenging behaviour, or find learning a challenge, a worthwhile and potentially a rewarding experience. As we wished to make the workshops both interactive and individually meaningful, we decided to restrict the number of participants to 20 to each conference and no fee was charged for attendance.

The original researchers from St Martin’s were contacted and one of these was available and pleased to be included in the programme. In addition, 9 of the teachers who were interviewed for the research were invited to contribute to the workshops plus one of the

Headteachers of one of the schools who was also interviewed for the research. A meeting with the contributors was arranged to finalise the programme and to clarify the level of contribution which the teachers and Headteacher would be prepared to undertake. At the meeting all the teachers and Head enthusiastically volunteered to act as group facilitators and more significantly provide the stimulus for each of the areas. In addition one of the teachers had agreed to create video interviews of pupils, who were challenging within school, describing what did and did not make a successful teacher and lessons, from their viewpoint.

It was agreed by the group that the first session of the afternoon should be a practical exploration, through the creation of a board game in small groups, a game which would have the theme of becoming a successful teacher in a school facing challenging circumstances.

In addition, as one of the teachers had access to a filming unit, it was also decided to record the workshops, subject to the agreement by the participants.

Background of the Participants

The participants were wide-ranging in their experience and backgrounds. They were evenly divided between those from mainstream secondary schools and those from special schools or short stay schools. At one of the workshops the day was used as an INSET day by the staff from a short stay school. A third of the participants held posts of responsibility, with considerable teaching experience and two thirds were mainscale teachers. There was one teaching assistant from a special school.

Format of the Workshops

The key areas which the workshops explored were:

- what constitutes a school facing challenging circumstances
- the reasons people had entered and remained in teaching – their philosophy
- putting the philosophy into practice - the skills and strategies involved
- the rewards of working with young people who presented challenging behaviour

The workshops were not presented as a course, providing techniques for working in schools facing challenging circumstances as such, but rather as precursors to further training, and motivational in their approach and ambience.

The morning was focused on brief presentations of these areas, followed by group discussions during which the participants explored their own ideas.

The afternoon was the practical task of creating a game. The remit was that the groups should create a game which took the players through a series of tasks/moves to the goal of being a successful teacher in challenging circumstances. In order to devise the game the participants are required to work as a group and discuss what elements, such as skills, strategies, challenges, issues and rewards would be appropriate for the game. Attractive materials and resources were provided as stimuli for the practical creation of the board games. When the games were completed, the groups tried out another group's game. There was a debriefing discussion regarding any of the aspects which had arisen from the activity.

To conclude the events, avenues of further training, through the LCC, and other areas of support would be offered to the participants. There was also an opportunity for the participants to complete a proforma, in which they were invited to request specific CPD and to request a work placement in another type of school.

Evaluation of the conferences

The conferences were extremely well-received by the participants. The overall atmosphere throughout both days was that the participants had been fully engaged in the themes of the day and at the end of the conferences they left feeling re-motivated and re-energised.

The variety and positivity of the contributors and the range of presentations was greatly appreciated by the participants. Many of the participants commented that the making of the game had been not only enjoyable but also very useful. Indeed the enthusiastic response to the creation of the games was a significant feature of the workshops and they were remarkably inventive.

The interactive nature of the conferences which enabled in-depth discussion and the sharing of ideas were highlighted by the participants as being very valuable. They also commented that it was good to meet others and that they felt that not only had they learned a great deal, but also they were feeling more confident by the end of the workshop and that they were 'making a difference' as teachers.

The terms 'enjoyable', 'thought-provoking', 'interesting' were the most frequently used words. From the evaluations and the ambience of the conferences, it would appear that the aims had been achieved.

Interestingly, a number of comments suggested that the workshops would be of value to those who were experiencing difficulties within the school and were 'reluctant to meet the challenge'.

Impact

In the short term, teachers working with challenging pupils would feel more supported and more confident in their practice. This would lead to higher retention rates in these schools and improved performance by both teachers and pupils. In addition, those teachers who may be considering posts in these schools would be more confident and feel better equipped, particularly following a work placement opportunity, to apply for and be successful in gaining posts. We would also anticipate an increase in applications for posts in special schools.

In the longer term, there will be an audit of the recruitment in both schools facing challenging circumstances and special schools, using the data collected prior to the project as a baseline, and retention rates of Lancashire secondary schools facing challenging circumstances.

Conclusion

Following the successful response to these workshops by the participants, the Recruitment and Retention Team will hold further events on Tuesday 6th March 2007 at Jupiter House, Altham Business Park, Accrington for teachers in mainstream and special schools. Please register your attendance on-line at

www.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/delegate/conferenceDetails.asp?cid=438

A further event, specifically for NQTs will be held on Friday 9th February 2007 at The Woodlands Centre, Chorley and the costs of the workshop will be absorbed by the Recruitment and Retention Team. Please register your attendance on-line at

www.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/delegate/conferenceDetails.asp?cid=439

or by contacting Kate Armstrong on (01772) 532643 or kate.armstrong@ed.lancscc.gov.uk as soon as possible, as places will be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

The costs of the workshop will be absorbed by the Recruitment and Retention Team. A draft programme for the day is attached for your information.