

Robin Shohet interviews Neil Berry, headteacher of Brampton Manor

Neil Berry (neilb26@hotmail.com) has been in education since 1971. He is a headteacher mentor and member of the London Lead Teachers Group. He has contributed to the programmes of the National College of School Leadership.

RS Thank you for agreeing to this interview. As you know I have been researching for a book on supporting teachers, financed by Teacher Support Network, and your school has been very generous in allowing me to come and do some research with your staff and students. I have found this extremely useful and relevant for my project. I want to do this special edition of *Self & Society* so some of the work can be recorded. I think it is an example of what can be done in changing a school culture.

Can I start with some background questions. How long have you been at the school and can you say how you found it when you arrived?

NB I came in June 2000. The school had failed an OFSTED inspection in 1999 and was labelled as having serious weaknesses. This was unexpected and a huge blow to the staff who were unprepared for this. In fact the LEA believed that the school was lucky not to be in the category of special measures.

RS And you have turned the school round. What were the first steps you took?

NB I and others. I did not do this on my own. I wanted to promote a new management culture which could lead to a whole school cultural change. I made an assessment of the Senior Management Team's strengths and weaknesses and told them what I expected of them. I had a very clear focussed recovery plan which everyone signed up to which we monitored carefully and regularly. I then had to focus on the very disruptive behaviour of the students. I patrolled the corridors for five hours a day and did every lunch and break duty, supporting staff, supporting kids, telling kids off. I also met with parents every day. It took about three years to have an effect. I came to every parents meeting, every staff event, ran a whole series of residential. We celebrated and communicated success within and outside the school. I took the view that nothing bad happens at Brampton. Some things are better than others and everything we do is capable of being improved. And if things do go wrong, look for a positive. We embraced the notion of a praise culture with lots of competitions, prizes, assemblies, letters home.

RS So appreciative inquiry was natural for you?

NB Yes. When you offered it you were pushing on an open door. But you gave us the language and structures to build on what we were already doing. The kids love it.

RS Yes we are teaching it to about fifty prefects at the end of the month who will take it into the citizenship lessons. We are well on the way to getting the whole school involved, but, as you say, the soil was very fertile. What else did you do?

NB I believed in being highly proactive on the public relations front. The aim was to be in the local paper regularly and to cultivate

good relationships with the reporters. Now we feature in the Newham Recorder, the local newspaper, every week. We involve the students in decision making. We give them a real voice and a modest budget. We find our prefects really useful here. They select themselves and if they do their job well anyone can stay a prefect. We create opportunities for parents to be as involved as possible.

RS So you saw the potential resources inside and outside the school for building community. What about the staff - how do you support them?

NB You support your staff by helping to make them feel happy and valued. By helping to create an environment that makes them want to be here. We give them opportunities to grow and develop, ensuring that the school provides a robust and professional staff development policy in house and externally. We use our own excellent practitioners and video their lessons to show what can be done. The Department of Education and Skills filmed our teachers working and the video was distributed to all schools in the country. We volunteer the school staff for LEA initiatives, both as a professional opportunity and a reward for their hard work. We have six staff doing higher degrees which we pay for and support fully. In terms of recruitment we became a Training School which means that we are on the cutting edge around pedagogy. This has helped us round recruitment, as we can recruit the teachers we want from teaching practice. And we then help people rise up through the ranks, supporting them in their first years and then preparing them for middle management, for here or somewhere else. We have three members of the senior management who used to be heads of department. And we work in partnership with other institutions – local primary schools, schools in other parts of the country,

National College for School Leadership, schools involved in the Afro Caribbean Project and the Royal Ballet School.

On another level we make the staff room comfortable. We have a shower for those who ride in. The staff can get food at cheap prices. We have plenty of network computers. We've put loads and loads of our forms and procedures on line so people can put reports, attendance on line. We try and reduce workload. For example we encourage people to phone parents which is more cost effective than writing letters, so we provide lots of phones round the school.

I think it is also an attitude, being considerate. It's important for me to exercise discretion. Around funerals, for example. There's no question about attendance on full pay. It's about being sympathetic, but above all it's about being fair to everyone. Sometimes that means being perceived as not being very flexible.

RS Why have you collectively been able to do change a culture whilst other schools may not be as successful?

NB This is the second time I have done it which helps. It's important to be confident. Tim Brighouse talks about courage and conviction. You have to lead from front and lead by example. You have to demonstrate credibility. Once you have done that, it doesn't matter if you can't do everything. A Head can't do everything.

I also actively celebrate and promote school well to LEA and the press as we talked about earlier. I ask people what's been good today. Because teachers get so caught up with the children they often can't step outside and see what has been good.

I am always looking for a positive outcome. To use a cliché, it's about the power of positive thinking. Nothing is bad. Just some things better than others, or as my dad

would say, 'There's no such thing as a bad pint of beer. Just some that are better than others.'

RS You sound as if you have a great ability to reframe everything positively which I am sure has contributed to the very supportive school culture. Sometimes even with this, teachers can still feel undermined. Are there other ways in which you can offer support?

NB There are many different kinds of support. It's quite a general term. If you want people to feel good, then you have to support be in ways *they* want. If you are talking about supporting them around the emotional bashing they get, then I think offering case studies is useful. Something practical. Teachers are often insecure, even at senior level. They need a template. We aim to be consistent with challenging students and to have a robust but fair and transparent disciplinary policy. We continually remind staff and students of our core purpose and values.

RS How do you see the school going? What's your real ambition for the school?

NB We've arrested the decline in behaviour and performance. We've improved exam results, but I'm not happy with the way students relate to each other when not directly supervised by a teacher. They emotionally hurt each other, perhaps how they feel they have been hurt at home. We can't cure all ills of society. We can be professional, and do what we do well, but it's frustrating we can't do it for everyone. I want caring for each other. This is proving tough. They come with so much baggage. You should read some of the case studies.

RS You mentioned Tim Brighouse earlier. I know he has written a paper to which you contributed on School Leadership in Challenging Urban Environments. Can you say more about your leadership?

NB I think the way I work is mostly innate. Either you work in this way or you don't. It's important to be open, honest, fair, transparent; to cherish people, value them, motivate them, play to their strengths; to embrace the notion of working as a team; to put yourself in the position of other; to treat people as you wish to be treated but also not curry popularity by being soft. Never be less than honest about any situation otherwise it will come back and haunt you.

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You have to do what you consider the right thing. The staff will respect you for acting appropriately. It's about having integrity; being sure; having a strong belief in yourself; backing your judgement; remembering why we are here. It's not for teachers to get on, but for children to achieve their potential, and of course to do that, it is highly desirable teachers get on.

You need to be prepared to put yourself on the line. When we had an Ofsted inspection in 2001 I told the staff that the only person who could get the sack is me. They wanted to do well not only for themselves but for me. And part of my job is helping them to feel secure in their practice and pedagogy. The teachers are doing a good job and I tell them. The best security blanket is in students achieving well, which they are.

RS That puts a lot of emphasis on results. My son is swotting for his exams at the moment and he feels this great pressure to succeed which has dampened his love of learning which he had in his first two years at secondary school.

NB There's no getting away from that. The government focus on results – the product. It's how we are judged which is why I say that getting good results is one way of helping the teachers feel secure. However, we don't consider our job finished when students reach sixteen. If you like we can see ourselves as gardeners, planting seeds. The government is beginning to change on this, seeing education as a continuum from three upwards. They still think they have to quantify to achieve this, rather than embracing it in a holistic way which sees it as a journey.

RS League tables and such like.

NB Yes. I am a pragmatist. I can only run the school in the way I want if I get the outcomes the government wants. I have to attract funding. When I applied for funding for specialist school status as an arts college, the first question I was asked was on outcomes. They didn't ask about our drama, our public performances, our connections with the Royal Ballet School.

It's a question of hanging on to your liferaft using your conviction as a paddle; and not drifting through the channelled water the government is pushing you down. This way you get there quicker, and have quality time at the end because you got there quicker.

RS Yes, your conviction comes through, and my experience at the school is of having quality time with you. I hope that will come through in the rest of the articles. Thank you.