From Me to Us:

project at Ralph Allen School to use systemic approaches for the benefit of students and staff

March 2008

Introduction

This is an interim report on the 'From Me to Us' project at Ralph Allen School, Bath written at the point when the Next Practice funding from the Innovation Unit (IU) comes to an end. The project itself will continue with the remaining funding streams through the remainder of the school year and beyond.

Context

Following several years' experience of introducing systemic approaches in primary schools and in the special needs sector, the **ecl** initiative of the **nowhere**foundation was keen to take the work more substantially into the secondary sector and in particular was keen for an opportunity to use a 'whole school' initiative. There had been links with Ralph Allen School through Jane James, a parent and governor there. Jane had introduced Judith Hemming as a consultant to the head and leadership team in 2005 and since that time had herself been working in a number of areas of the school beginning to introduce some of the ideas from **ecl**. At the same time, Libby had been having regular systemic coaching sessions to support her own leadership, strengthening her conviction that these approaches could contribute significantly to her strategic vision for the school.

The possibility of the IU funding through the Next Practice Initiative was pursued and when the desired level of funding was not secured, the school with the support of the **nowhere**foundation persuaded other stakeholders to put in additional funding. This additional resource will mean that the project can continue beyond the end of the IU support (end of March 2008).

Systemic perspectives

'The systemic perspective enables individuals – leaders, teachers, support staff, family members and students – to look at the bigger picture'

The **nowhere**foundation has brought to the project its insights, which draw on work with families and organisations using systems-centred methods and techniques developed over the last thirty years. This work has primarily been located in Germany by practitioners including Franke 2003, Franke-Grishcke 2004, using the thinking of others such as Hellinger, Weber and Beaumont 1998, Senge 1990, de Shazer 1985 and Ulsamer 2003. The radical nature of their ideas has meant that the work has been slow to take root in the UK education system but through the projects in primary schools and elsewhere, there was an indication that the benefits could be developed in the secondary sector: the time was right.

The systemic perspective enables individuals – leaders, teachers, support staff, family members and students – to look at the bigger picture. By seeing themselves and their issues in the context of the systems they belong to, each person has more space to understand the influences and forces that are helping to shape behaviours and their capacity to engage with learning – and, importantly, to be able to take effective actions to improve the situation.

The fundamental shift with this approach is to accept and to include the student's family and community systems as a natural and essentially dynamic part of the education process. The emphasis is to give a far greater priority to the primacy of inclusion and belonging in the school/learning process. This perspective can offer a major contribution to implementation of the 'Every Child Matters' agenda and the children's ten year strategy.

SEAL

Ralph Allen also became a pilot school for the introduction of the government's secondary SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) initiative in September 2007 and so the project gave the opportunity for development of ways of blending systemic and SEAL methods and approaches. The move from focusing on cognitive learning though to emotional learning could be extended by systemic approaches to include 'sensing' and intuitive ways of knowing and learning.

Project implementation July 2007 to March 2008

This section of the report looks at six key elements of the project and identifies what was good and difficult about each and what could be different about each for the future (the learning).

1. Culture change
2. RAScools (year 7 nurture group)
3. Dissolving Barriers to Learning workshops
4. Home-school links
5. 10/7 mentoring
6. Staff development

1. Culture change

From the start of the project, the challenge and the significance of culture change has been clear. The Head has been leading and championing a real innovative shift for the whole school community. The shift encompasses a changing focus from the individual to the whole system. The shift focuses on the responsibilities of everyone to include, respect, acknowledge and play their part in the learning of themselves and others. It requires the development and practice of fundamental skills such as listening, questioning, empathising, being open and creative. An important aspect of this overall project has been the way that leadership within the school operates and is viewed. Changes range from fundamental elements within strategic plans – for example the adoption of the 'From Me to Us' tenet as one of the two overarching aims of the school – to smaller but significant shifts – for example the introduction of a 'check in' at the start of meetings.

Good
- The Leadership Team, governors, middle leaders and managers within the support and administrative functions have all taken part at some level in changing practices
- The concept of culture and its significance has come alongside strategy as a leadership imperative

Difficult
- Moving the existing leadership practice from being task-focused and 'steady state' to being more people-oriented and creative
- The shifts to using skills such as listening, questioning, empathising and being open and creative sound obvious and simplistic – the reality of getting teachers and others in school to practise them indicates the very real challenge they present
- Being able to sustain activity over a 3 year period on limited resource

Different
- More intensive training for senior leaders and catalysts
- A longer lead in time to develop whole school awareness prior to action

2. Rascools, the Year 7 nurture group

2a The impetus to act and ambitions for the group

The initial issue that led to the creation of the nurture group was the recognition by key staff members that each year a number of students arrived at Ralph Allen from primary schools already showing signs of vulnerability. As these students moved through the school, frequently their disaffection and inability to engage with the opportunities available at Ralph Allen was seen to increase, and staff members felt frustrated and saddened that the cycle had not been broken. There was an inevitable impact on the whole school system.

The idea to start a nurture group in 2007 came from Kath Brownell, the Head of Year 7 and in charge of the transition from primary to secondary. It was quickly supported by Lauren Trezise, the SENCO, and taken to Libby Lee, who pointed out that there had always been a plan to have a nurture group and enthusiastically endorsed it.

The students themselves chose the name – Rascools – the initials of the school with a youth culture word!

The principles behind having a 'nurture' group were very much in line with the systemic work of the **nowhere**foundation and the project fitted smoothly into the wider transition project being implemented. The school was simultaneously engaged with the government's SEAL initiative and it was judged that a blend of these two approaches would form an excellent basis for the nurture group. A team was established, consisting of Kath, Lauren and Christine Dearsley (at that time the Assistant SENCO). Their aims for the nurture group were broadly to:

• ease the transition from primary to secondary school for more vulnerable students
• have them bond and hence feel attachment and belonging to the smaller group, which in turn would strengthen their connection to Ralph Allen and education in general
• build their confidence and self esteem
• improve the quality of their engagement with learning; and
• to the extent possible, address some of the underlying issues of the students

2b Criteria for identification of students and subsequent participation

Ralph Allen staff routinely visit all primary schools to gather both formal and informal information about the students due to come to the school and, during such visits, a list was developed of potential candidates for the group. The team subsequently went through the list and jointly identified fifteen students who had a range of issues that limited their ability to engage with learning. These included:
• attendance issues
• behaviour issues (anger, vulnerability)
• signs of disaffection (poor motivation, low self-esteem, unhappy at school, peer group friendship difficulties)
• learning difficulties (rooted in, for example, dyspraxia, ADHD)
• difficult family circumstances (child protection issues)

The team attempted to get a range of children from different tutor groups, as well as a balance of the sexes. However four sets of parents withheld permission for their children to be part of the group and one student attended for just two weeks before being withdrawn by their parents.

2c Group Structure and Activities to date

The nurture group has met in the same room every day for the last period, thus constituting 20% of the students' time in class. Lessons were planned jointly by the team, and taught initially by all three, with the support of either of two teaching assistants. The two main themes for the group have been 'forming' as a group which offered mutual support and understanding and secondly to break down barriers between home and school.

Activities have included:
- co-operation and listening exercises to build early safety and bonding
- circle sessions
- drama and art activities
- maths, English and science
- use of personal pebbles for registration and group explorations of feelings
- reflective log books
- feelings thermometers
- tea party for parents

Themes have shaped a series of activities, such as an airplane crash which started with the making of passports and luggage, evolved into drama highlighting group awareness and communication, and continued with the joint creation of a map of the island on which they 'landed'! Curriculum subjects are integrated creatively, for example, maths through learning about co-ordinates on the map. There has been flexibility in allowing Rascools students occasionally to miss sessions, or parts of sessions, when these have clashed with practical mainstream classes.

The structure of the group has evolved and, since January, the group has been taught solely by Chris Dearsley, with additional support from the TAs and members of the leadership team. This is for a range of reasons, but the hope is that just one main teacher will lead to even more continuity and stability for the group.

2d Preliminary Findings

The students come from some of the most challenging home and family circumstances. Having got to know the students better over the months, one team member commented that it seems as if each participant has had major trauma in their lives.

Adrian Wotton, the School Improvement Partner for Ralph Allen, having interviewed five Rascool students and two staff members involved five months into the project, concluded:

> *"There was enough positive feedback to warrant serious consideration for developing the scheme further once a thorough evaluation has taken place and necessary changes made. It does not seem to be having a huge impact at present, but it is still in its infancy as an approach, and more time to let it run and evaluate may be needed."*

The nurture group has been focusing on building the capacity of these young people to function in school and, to some extent, addressing some of the deeper issues that are affecting them. Results will take time. So, just seven months into the project, a full analysis is difficult.

Some preliminary findings are evident, however, and the qualitative data gathered, alongside the student's own evaluations through the PASS system (Pupil Attitude to Self and School), provide the most valid indication of how the project is progressing. A summary of the quantitative and qualitative data available is provided below, with full data sets (though not all qualitative evidence) in the appendices.

Quantitative Data:

Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS)

PASS aims to measure specific aspects of children's attitudes towards themselves as learners and their attitudes towards school. It is a multi-factorial measure of pupil attitudes to school, learning and success, which can be administered with individual young people, small groups, whole classes and whole schools. The data it yields can be utilised as a means of establishing baseline positions and to support effective planning, implementation and evaluation of interventions on individual, group and whole school levels.

All year 7 students did PASS in October 2007 and 7 of the 10 pupils in the Rascool group repeated it in February 2008. The results (all percentages) are shown in the table, the first line being the average for the whole of year 7, then the Rascool group scores for both October and February, followed by the change in that period. More detail about what each category measures are provided with the bar charts below.

Each time the test is done it provides a snap shot, which can be influenced by the mood of the child, however when aggregated as an average it becomes more significant. One unequivocal result is how much lower the Rascools' scores are than the year's as a whole and reflects the vulnerable and challenging nature of the group.

It is also clear that there has been an overall positive shift with seven out of nine categories showing improvement. It is particularly gratifying that the most positively impacted categories are: attitudes to teachers; feelings about school; and self-regard – as all these have been the focus of the Rascool work. Increases around confidence, preparedness and perceived learning capability are also a good sign.

	Attitudes to teachers	Feelings about school	Self-regard	Learner Confidence	Preparedness for learning
Year 7 Oct07	81	83	70	69	85
Ras Oct07	51	53	21	46	33
Ras Feb08	79	69	36	60	46
Ras shift	+28	+16	+15	+14	+13

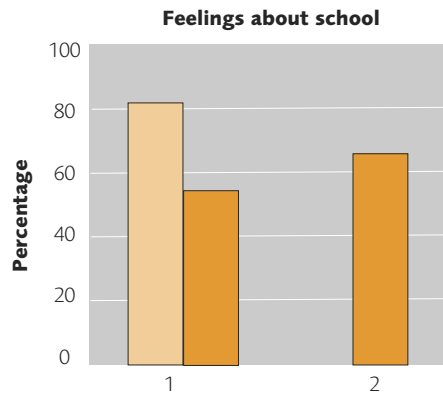|	Perceived Learning Capability	Attendance Attitudes	Response to Curriculum	General Work Ethic
Year 7 Oct07	78	80	74	78
Ras Oct07	27	45	29	55
Ras Feb08	37	53	30	48
Ras shift	+10	+8	+1	-7

Notes for all graphs:
- Series 1 (pale orange) is the Year 7 average; Series 2 (bright orange) the Rascool Group
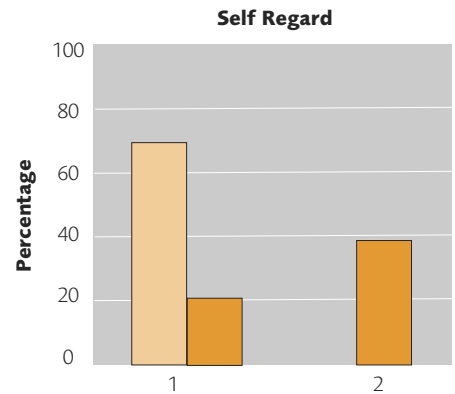- 1 - October 2007; 2 - February 2008

Attitudes to teachers – measures pupils' perceptions of their relationships with teachers.

Attitudes to Teachers
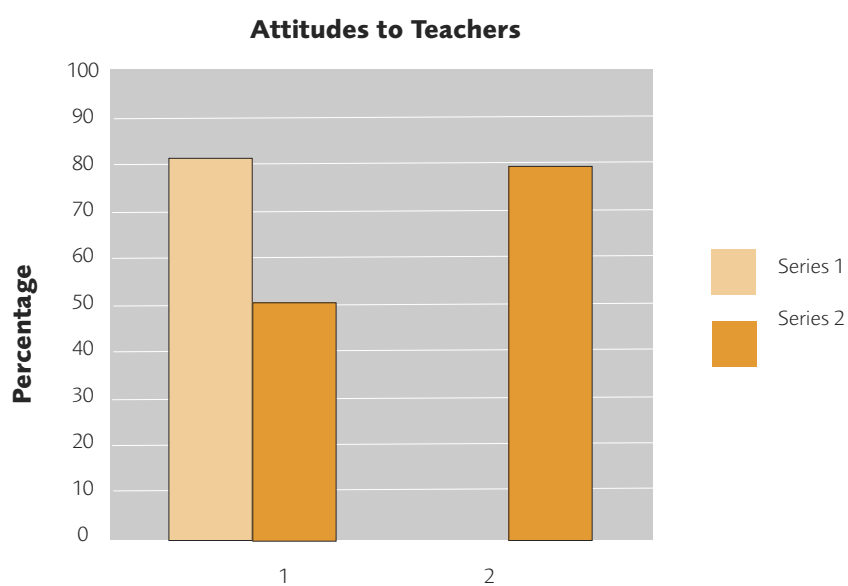
Feelings about school –
measures pupils' sense of well being,
safety and comfort in school.

Feelings about school

Learner Confidence - measures
pupils' confidence in approaching and
dealing with learning and perseverance
when presented with challenging tasks.

Learner Confidence

Perceived Learning Capability –
measures pupils' views of how positive
and successful they feel in their specific
capabilities as learners.

Perceived Learning Capability

Self-Regard as a Learner –
measures the impact of their learning on
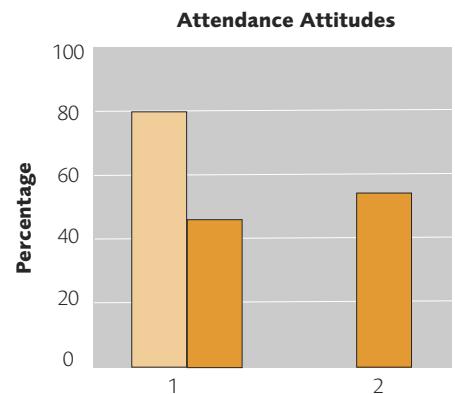their self concept more generally.

Self Regard

Preparedness for Learning –
measures pupils' perceptions of their
behaviour and attitude in learning
situations (including metacognitive skills).

Preparedness for learning
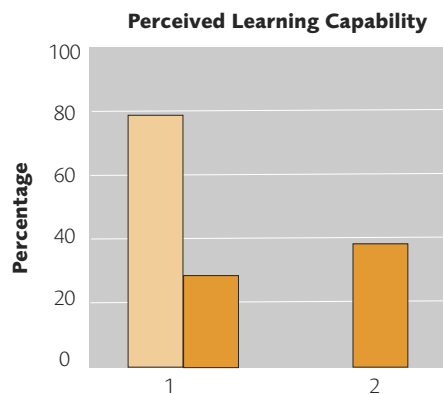
Attendance Attitudes – measures
pupils' attitudes to attendance at school.

Attendance Attitudes

Response to Curriculum demands – measures pupils' perceptions of the appropriateness of the level of difficulty of work they are asked to complete.

General Work Ethic – measures pupils' attitudes and responses to work in general and includes associated feelings such as a 'high' anxiety element.

Response to Curriculum

General Work Ethic
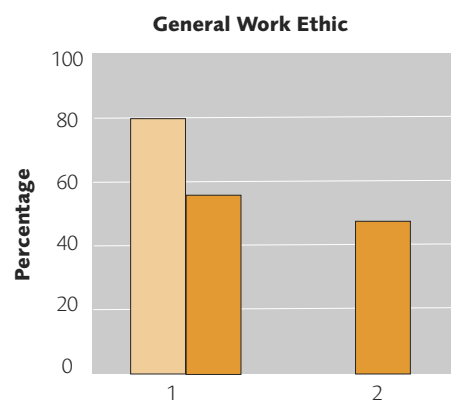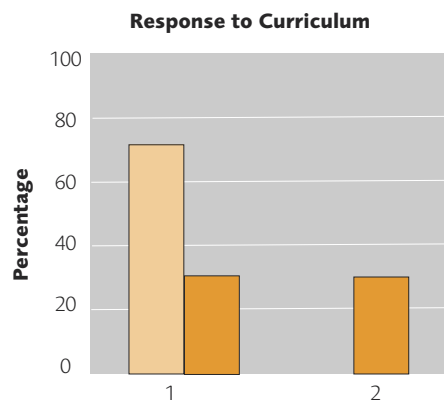
Behaviour Data

Behaviour can be affected at any time by issues arising within the family, friendships, illness and school stresses, so is impossible to analyse in any categorical way. Each Primary school was contacted for behaviour data, however as they log only the most severe instances, the data received is only the most extreme events and no clear comparison can be made with Ralph Allen's more sophisticated system.

The data shows that most are managing their behaviour within the school day and, while there are clearly behavioural issues arising for the Rascool students, they are within the range one would expect to see, given the profile of the group. It should be noted that the three on Governor Disciplinary levels have particularly deep-seated issues and all will require ongoing special support over the coming school years.

Attendance Data

The results show that the Rascool group have moved from an average attendance in Primary school of 87% over the whole year, to an average of just 79% as of March this year in Ralph Allen. While this seems quite a drop, there is one girl whose major attendance issues (at 22%) are skewing the figures. When she is removed from the average, it becomes 85%. This is not a significant difference from the primary level. Indeed, given that two of the students with low attendance have both suffered bereavements in the family, and that March is just after the flu season, it may even be seen as an improvement as it would be expected to rise as the year goes on.

85% is still clearly below the full year 7 average, which, as of March, is 94%. It will be interesting to see how the Rascools progress over the course of the year and whether the group can influence attendance in any way. As the project has developed, it has been increasingly questioned as to whether this is possible – as the group runs too late in the day to and other methods could address this issue better.

Attainment

Scores at KS2 were provided by the primary schools, and reading and spelling ages were taken on entry at Ralph Allen, but changes in attainment are not expected in the timescale of the project and no comparative data is available.

Qualitative Data:

The summary below is based on interviews with staff, students and a guardian of a Rascool student, as well as drawing on Adrian Wotton's independent assessment.

Good
- Rascool students' overriding view that the programme is worthwhile; helps them in school; and provides that essential element for successful learning: fun!
- Specifically, they report the group being a place where it is more relaxing; they can be themselves; listening, communication in group and decision making skills are all learnt; and they themselves are listened to and treated fairly
- Some staff members' perception is that individuals in the Rascools group have been making clear progress in terms of confidence and ability to join in group activities
- The foster-parent of one Rascool student reported that she herself was helped, knowing the group would be taking place. She also attributes to the positive influence of the group the fact that the student has settled, become more confident and now loves Ralph Allen
- The tea party was deemed a great success by all those who attended – staff, students and parents/carers
- The project leaders feel that Rascool students have developed a greater sense of belonging and that their issues have been acknowledged and addressed to the extent possible at the start of year 7

Difficult
- The timing of the group, at the last period of the day, is not ideal. Students reported arriving tired and stressed and staff acknowledge that having bottled up their frustrations all day, students are not in the best frame of mind to tackle the more challenging learning
- Behaviour can be worse than in other classes, as reported by both staff and students. While some view this as a straightforward problem, others believe it is also an indication of how safe the pupils feel to be themselves there
- The gender imbalance should be avoided in the future
- One member of staff feels that Rascools is not fulfilling a 'nurturing' role or supporting a sense of belonging in the students
- Others are concerned whether such a varied mix of pupils is best supported by taking part in one group – can it really meet such differences in need and ability? Particularly when some of the pupils may have benefited most from some one-to-one mentoring to build their ability to participate in such a group before taking part
- Pressures on staff generally for measurable targets and related concerns about the impact of the group on learning for KS3
- How to integrate SEAL and systemic, with some finding the systemic approach more challenging, especially as less formalised than SEAL
- Questions of how to really assess the value of the Rascools group, especially as it would take time to show any results. What then would be a valid measure of success?
- The team with three staff members, all with very different styles and experience (pastoral, SEN, behavioural and subject), had difficulties finding time to plan. Having taken such a big risk in doing something so radical, at times they struggled to meet their own ambitious aims. By January, both teachers had left the project

Different
- Ensure a better gender balance
- Involve parents earlier in discussions about plans and benefits
- Have stronger curriculum planning
- Move the session to the first part of the day – ideally period 1 to set them up for the day
- Have a dedicated home base classroom
- Deeper training for the staff involved

3. Dissolving Barriers to Learning Workshops

'...every member of staff I've taken to a DBL workshop has come away from it with a shift in themselves…'

Four of six planned workshops have taken place within the project. These have provided parents and staff from Ralph Allen School with a unique opportunity to explore the issues preventing students from learning. The constellations and discussions from each one-day workshop have been transcribed and transcriptions offered to participants. Wherever possible follow-up support has been given to participants by RA staff.

A number of support staff have attended the workshops and Chris Dearsley comments:

> *"They are very valuable because every member of staff I've taken to a DBL workshop has come away from it with a shift in themselves and the way either they work with students, or the way they look at their job role, or for whatever reason. They have found it invaluable."*

Jude Austin, the new manager of the Green Room, attended a DBL workshop on behalf of a vulnerable year 7 student along with the student's support worker from 'Compass' the Youth Offending Team. Jude reports:

> *"The stuff that came out was phenomenal, because I thought I had a reasonably wise head on my shoulders and this is the way things should be going and Terry had been agreeing with this, and, having used this technique it sort of flipped it around and we'd both started using it and the results have been fantastic. And I actually used it last night. I went and did a home visit on this student on the way home because he'd had a rough day, and there's just this turning around and it's like having the blinkers taken off. I've found it really, really valuable."*

Good
- The workshops have proven powerful in shifting the way participants view issues, as well as providing a great opportunity for a whole range of the disparate community involved in education to explore these issues together
- Parents of Rascools students have the opportunity to explore family issues in a supported space
- Staff, including support staff, have had the opportunity of working with parents in support of the students
- Staff and other child-welfare workers have had the chance to look at issues from a 'supervision' perspective and found it valuable

Difficult
- It has not always been easy to persuade parents to take part, as it can feel intimidating to enter a room with twelve to fifteen unknown adults to discuss their most intimate issues

Different
- Better preparation in advance of the workshops and follow up support to parents

4. Home-school links

The project has enabled a development of better home school links especially for year 7 students' families. This development has built on learning from working more closely with families through the Green Room and also built on the contact made through the DBL workshops. For the first time a member of staff has met with parents in their homes to discuss the sensitive nature of problems (often rooted in family circumstance) and co-create strategies for support and moving forward.

Good
- Teaching assistants and other pastoral support staff have been able to make real links with parents/carers and families – through phone calls, home visits and some different opportunities of visiting school – for example a tea party invitation rather than a request to visit to discuss behaviour

Difficult
- It is not easy to build links and networks with parents at secondary level – particularly the parents of students facing challenging circumstances and barriers to belonging in school and to effective learning
- The issues of confidentiality and the sensitivity of many of the issues affecting the Rascools families present challenges

Different
- Regular planned events such as the tea party for families of vulnerable students
- Develop different less intimidating arrangements for parents' evenings
- Build on the confidence and skills of support staff to make home visits

5. 10/7 mentoring

The project plan included provision to review and develop the existing 10/7 peer mentoring scheme, which has been operating in school for a number of years. Development work so far undertaken by staff and **nowhere** consultants has resulted in an innovative and strongly designed model for peer mentoring. The head has realised the whole school potential of the model for other groups of students and indeed for staff – this is likely to lead to a skills-building programme across the school.

Good
- The potential of the scheme has opened up from being a year 10 and year 7 project into a peer-mentoring approach for the whole school as well as enabling stronger links with feeder schools and developing critical skills amongst the whole staff group to effect the wider culture change in the community of learning
- A number of staff – including teaching assistants – enjoyed 'playing' with some radical and innovative concepts during the design process

Difficult
- Some teaching staff find it difficult to engage in an open creative process – the practicalities and logistics of delivery preoccupy them
- Finding time for year 10s to take part in mentoring training is tricky when there is pressure on curriculum time associated with GCSE deadlines

Different
- Better planning of time to release staff

6. Staff development

Support staff

From the start, support staff have been key in the planning and implementation of aspects of the project. They have shown how the 'team around the child' can actually work. The project has built on and embedded many structural changes that had taken place within the school as part of workforce remodelling. For example, pastoral managers had been appointed to work with key stages supporting heads of year with many aspects of student support and family liaison.

Catalyst team

The project plan always included the vital element of a team of internal catalysts within the school. These agents of change would lead the various initiatives of the project and would work together to support each other and to communicate and help others in the system to understand the changes. The notion of 'catalyst' was new within the school and new to the IU. Catalysts struggled to fully understand their role and a number have chosen to leave the catalyst group for a variety of reasons including a perceived clash between aspects of systemic thinking and Christian belief. Despite these difficulties, the project success is partly due to the vital role played by a number of key catalysts including the head herself, the deputy head and the Behaviour Support Specialist who eventually took over running of the nurture group.

Beauty Group

An example of individual development endeavour occurred when Ralph Allen staff were being introduced to elements of systemic practice in schools during the summer of 2007. At that time, Lauren Trezise, the SENCO, became particularly inspired to use aspects of the approach with a group of disaffected and vulnerable Year 10 students. She has successfully used aspects of 'stilling' and building a sense of belonging with a group of ten students in a Group working towards a Beauty diploma.

Recently the School Improvement Partner has undertaken evaluation of the Rascools and the Beauty group. He comments:

> "Although most students make good overall progress at the school, there is a relatively small group who do not – the lower end of middle ability girls. It is testimony to the school's commitment to inclusion that they are not only changing curriculum provision, but also giving these girls a voice to influence change."

Creativity

As part of developing a new way of looking at things, collaborating and tackling issues or sub-projects or tasks – the school has begun to embrace more creative ways of working together. Inspired by Ken Robinson's video clip – staff have met together without an agenda or a handout – to build ideas and support each other to find new ways of tackling teaching, learning or classroom management issues.

Good

- The contribution and confidence of support staff at the school has developed hugely – particularly in their work with vulnerable children and in making links with other support agencies and with families
- Chris Dearsley, who has co-managed the IU project and is now responsible for running the Rascools nurture group, is not a teacher (a phrase which we have assiduously tried to avoid throughout our work!). She was at one part of the year the Assistant SENCO – but for various reasons – some of which relate to her perceived status within the school – she has reverted to being the Behaviour Support Specialist. She has had a profound influence on the success

'It is testimony to the school's commitment to inclusion that they are not only changing curriculum provision, but also giving these girls a voice to influence change.'

of the project and has supported the Head and other members of the leadership team – well beyond the remit of her role
- A number of teaching assistants and cover supervisors and administrative staff have taken part in aspects of the project: four of them are catalysts; a total of six have attended the DBL (three of them between 2 and 4 times)
- The new manager of the Green Room – the behaviour support facility within the school - is an HLTA. She has welcomed individual coaching offered within the project and has used the sessions to develop systemic practices within the Green Room: use of the feelings thermometer, developing a sense of belonging through a birthday card scheme and also through use of music and some stilling practices
- The four cover supervisors benefited from several meetings focused on systemic approaches. They began to find ways of looking at things differently and this changed their practice

Difficult
- Teachers have found it hard to accept consistently the contribution of support staff
- There has been a separation between the academic and pastoral aspects of the school – the stronger the pastoral, the easier it is for teachers not to play their part in behaviour management and student support
- Perceived clash in faith-based values with the systemic approach
- Lack of time and space to develop a new skills set
- Structure of the timetable and the academic ethos of a successful comprehensive school militates against a holistic view of the child

Different
- Creating a long term learning and development plan for teachers so they can train in these ways of working together
- Engaging the Christian fellowship amongst the staff to find common ground
- Strengthened systemic leadership through continued input and engagement of the extended leadership team