



Reflective accounts

From Me to Us: How can we make Ralph Allen truly inclusive?

Libby Lee, Headteacher of Ralph Allen School, Bath, UK
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The culture change project entitled 'From Me to Us' really started with the most forgotten part of the school population; those who were excluded from lessons and eventually were at risk of permanent school exclusion. These students gathered in a temporary hut called the 'Green Room', a space and environment that prepared them for moving back into class whilst giving respite to the class teacher and to the young person.

It was not widely understood that the Green Room was a place of nurture. Many staff in the school considered that the young people they sent there should experience punishment. By shining a light on this area and looking systemically at it we were better able to embrace the principles of 'wholeness' and 'belonging'.

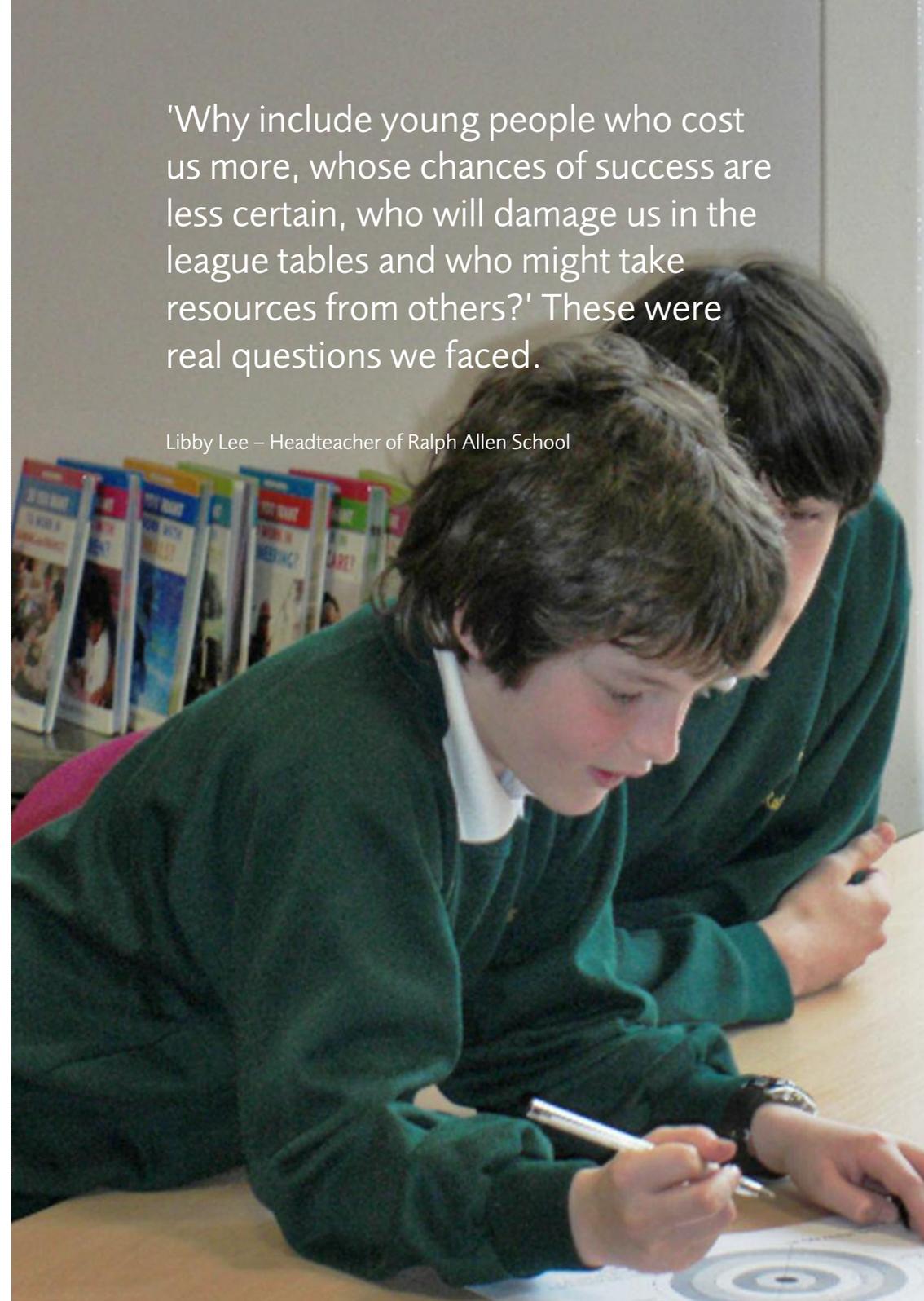
The school had faced the challenge of what it means to be 'inclusive' many times. It is an ideological challenge in what is considered to be a fairly affluent white middle class area. 'Why include young people who cost us more, whose chances of success are less certain, who will damage us in the league tables and who might take resources from others? These 'difficult' young people do not come with additional resource and the school is always full so why should we not just exclude them and take in some 'nicer' ones?' These were real questions we faced.

In addition, other schools set a standard for this kind of ethos in their admissions practices and in their practice of advising young people that it was best to try a 'fresh start' at Ralph Allen rather than get permanently excluded. It was my determination that we should turn these 'failures' and 'rejects' from other schools into a virtue, or a success. And we have.

It's hard to recall now the anger that this approach engendered in some staff. It seemed counterintuitive to embrace such 'problem' young people. Of course we have not achieved breakthrough with them all but our success is significant. We began to see the positive results acknowledged in our Ofsted inspections. And now it is a recognised area of our success: Ofsted judge 'inclusion' to be outstanding. The 'every child matters' section of our SEF, section 4, (School Evaluation Form) has become our pre-occupation.

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The journey begins

So, in April 2006, working closely with the Green Room manager, Chris Charles, and Jane James and Terry Ingham, **ecl** consultants from the **nowhere** foundation, we devised a bid for the Innovation Unit (IU) at the DfES (Department for Education and Skills). This consisted of three main projects:

- create mentoring across ages and phases
- set up a special type of constellations workshop for children experiencing extreme difficulties which we called 'Dissolving Barriers to Learning'
- create a nurture group in Year 7 – which the group members called the 'RASCOOLS'

To help and support the projects we also put money aside for developing the leadership team, individually and collectively, and set up a 'catalyst team' of interested staff who were strategically placed to influence changes and act as a resource to each other.

We eventually gained some funding from the IU and raised some from a local Trust, the **nowhere** group, and our Local Authority as well, but it came through very late in the year which meant we had little time to plan and prepare. This was almost our undoing.

The 'RASCOOLS' project focused on a small group of ten Year 7 students. From discussions with their primary schools, we realised that these individual children were particularly vulnerable and at risk of 'exclusion' in the broadest sense of the word. Working with the head of SEN, the Head of Year 7 and the Green Room manager, we formed the children as a group, off-timetable, for each afternoon. This amounted to 20% of the timetable. We knew from the outset that this was a very risky project.

We developed specially some systemic exercises for the nurture group, which we used alongside some SEAL tools. We involved parents. We wanted to encourage above all the students' sense of belonging – to each other, to the school and to their families. We worked with the needs and

issues that they presented, making them feel noticed and rewarded for the efforts they made. It was different and it was not easy but in September 2007 we set off with hope.

By the end of the first term, however, two of the key staff who had been behind the project, both teachers, pulled out saying it was too difficult and not the right thing for these young people. Their withdrawal and the challenges they put down made life very difficult for me and for the Green Room manager, who was a member of support staff.

In addition some of the leadership team were doubtful of what we were doing regarding the project and the thinking behind it. New members of the team had joined since an initial session with Judith Hemming in 2004 and they didn't understand the principles behind the project. They were also influenced by the staff who had reacted very strongly against an INSET day organised on the second day of the new term to launch '**From Me to Us**'.

During that day we worked with innovative concepts and methods exploring human systems, hidden dynamics, mapping techniques, feelings and sensing. It was likened to a 'sceance' by some staff and, 18 months into the project, has still left a tail of resentment for many.

I do now understand that this was too much too quickly for them. My eagerness to share what I had gained so much from, mis-fired and left staff feeling deeply uncomfortable and worried.

The beginning of the new term in January 2008 was a dark time.

What carried us through?

On reflection I can see that:

- We had a commitment to the children in the nurture group and I could see they were benefiting more and more. To support Chris, members of the Leadership Team agreed to get actively involved in the work with the RASCOOLS

- Both Chris and I had systemic coaching support, based outside school, during which we could work on our concerns and develop ideas
- Chris remained confident and was forging ahead with some experimental techniques such as the use of family maps, group Feelings Thermometers, mini constellations and ways of finding support
- Being part of a wider external initiative also helped. It meant it wasn't just an idea of mine that could be shelved quietly: we were part of an experiment and had an obligation to continue
- We had invaluable help and ideas 'on tap' from our external 'catalysts' in the **nowhere** foundation
- Our own internal catalyst team met frequently to work with each other in a very open way, to explore a new language and gain insight into systemic work. Some never reached an understanding and others fell by the wayside but some things were slowly understood and relationships and language began to change

It was a steep learning curve but from this first year I understood some key issues about change – seeing the whole picture better; attending to ourselves as a leadership team; getting more support to people where and when needed; and grasping opportunities for creative and innovative ways of thinking whenever possible. Now we are in the second year of the project – through the Communities for Learning initiative – and being in a second cycle makes it easier. We all know better what we are trying to achieve and the possibilities there are for moving forward. That said, we have had no external funding this year so we have had to be resourceful.

The second phase

In this second year I have blended the work of the '**From me to Us**' project far more into the work of the whole school. In particular I have wanted to involve young people more directly, hence we accelerated the introduction of a new peer-mentor model. As part of this we have also just started a constellations club for the sixth form (Years 12 and 13) to help them support each other with learning issues.

The 'Dissolving Barriers to Learning' workshops were a real success and a

vital underpinning of our work with the most at risk young people. We acknowledge and accept that these workshops worked in all kinds of sometimes mysterious ways but that almost without exception, the insight we and parents have gained has been profound.

The RASCOOLs project did not run in the second year because funding didn't allow it but a 'TimeOut' process has been set up by Chris Charles at the request of staff. With this initiative came the requirement for staff to take part in mediation, so teachers have learned more about how to break down the barriers between themselves and challenging young people, whereas the RASCOOLs project only included few staff and spread little learning.

These are the new projects for this year – the '*what*' of '**From Me to Us**'. The other and deeper side of my learning as a leader is about '*how*' we manage the changes. I believe this learning is what is making a real difference in the school. I understand better the need to work with the leadership team, and have successfully extended the work of my coach Sue Abbotson to work not just with me but with the whole team at our regular conferences and awaydays.

And indeed, I understand now how better to use the resource of the **nowhere** foundation as 'innovation' coaches and consultants, working with key catalysts on an on-going basis rather than just leaning on them when I do not know what to do.

The leadership team will now confidently enter into activities such as determining where a value sits within an organisation in the school by standing in a constellation. They have also undertaken some deeper learning by attending training courses in 'Organisational Constellations', as has the new Chair of Governors. The annual development plan has had new life breathed into it and is now written and acted on as a series of organisational breakthrough questions.

We are developing further a culture of coaching in the school. Now each member of the leadership team has their own systemic coach. We use

'creative days' to unlock school-based issues, working collaboratively on specific ideas for change.

One of the principles underpinning all the work of the leadership team is that we do not 'go alone'. All our projects have co-leads. We are demonstrating that leading and managing change is a team activity (**From Me to Us**) and as well as receiving we also 'give it' by coaching middle leaders on NCSL Leadership Pathways and Leading From the Middle programmes.

This has been a four year journey. The next phase of our work will focus even more strongly on 'student voice' to determine the future shape of our curriculum. I am proud as a leader that the Deputy Head is preparing that bid in conjunction with a consultant from **nowhere**. We are also going through a process of becoming a Trust with partners, one of which is **nowhere** foundation. This Trust, and a culture encompassing mindful behaviours, coaching conversations, heartfelt leadership with a systemic perspective is my legacy to Ralph Allen School.



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