



# ‘Our Schools’

Building a Culture of  
Partnership and Participation  
in Primary Schools

David Holmes

## **‘Our Schools’ Building a Culture of Partnership and Participation in Primary Schools**

This booklet has been produced to help schools. We encourage schools to download, print off and photocopy booklets as needed, from the Peaceful Schools Website:

[www.peacefulschools.org.uk](http://www.peacefulschools.org.uk) or the TES Resources website.

David Holmes asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this booklet.

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### **About the Author**

David Holmes has worked in education for over thirty years as teacher, head teacher, education advisor and trainer. He has taught in a wide variety of schools and achieved several highly successful Ofsted inspections.

As a Healthy Schools Advisor with Derbyshire local authority, David’s main focus was drug education in primary schools. He was also responsible for supporting schools across the county with different aspects of health and social education together with action planning. David led a number of key initiatives whilst with the Healthy Schools Team, including the development of a primary PSHCEE framework, active and democratic learning, a totally new approach to pupil representation (that involved having pupil Ministers and a Cabinet) and a popular Healthy Lifestyle Award.

David was a senior national trainer with School Councils UK for several years and has worked with schools in Uganda and Romania. He had also undertaken work around ways in which we can build a culture for partnership and participation in primary schools. Since taking early retirement, David has enjoyed working with, and supporting a range of groups both locally and further afield.

David has a long-standing commitment to pupil spiritual health and well-being and the concept of peaceful schools. He believes both are an integral part of successful school communities and that we need to promote both if we are to give our children and young people good quality education!

As part of his contribution to the peaceful schools movement David has written the **‘Promoting the Spiritual Health and Well-being of Children in Primary Schools’** booklet\* which explores children’s natural spirituality and ways in which we can nurture this.

(\*Available as a free download on the Peaceful Schools and the TES Resources websites)

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## 1. Introduction

Welcome to 'Our Schools', and the opportunity to take a look at, and explore, your school as a community.

We often think about the schools where we work, and/or where our children go, as being 'community schools'. We tend to think of a 'community school' as one that serves its local community. I believe that schools need to consider themselves to be important and valuable communities, as well as playing an active role in their local community!

Chambers 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dictionary defines a community as: 'A body of persons leading a common life,' to which we can add the definition from the MacMillan Dictionary: 'the feeling that you belong to a group and that this is a good thing'. From these definitions, it is easy to understand how all schools can be a community. It is the nature of the school as a community, as well as its relationship with the community of which it is a part, that gives it a certain identity and can help to make it successful.

'No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be **of** the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for the other.' Frank Lloyd Wright

Just as Frank Lloyd Wright's house should belong to the hill, so the people who are its community should belong to the school and the school as an entity should belong to its people. It is that belonging that makes a good school – an 'Our School'.

The following pages have been designed to give you an opportunity to:

- explore what is meant by 'Our Schools';
- reflect on some of the benefits of being such a community;
- identify ways in which schools can be an 'Our School'.



Why 'Our Schools'? The title and thoughts came about when I was working with a nursery and infant school. As with many schools it had both its challenges and problems. It wasn't always the most supportive of communities; academic achievement wasn't outstanding; aspirations weren't high and education was not valued by many of the parents. Despite that, it was actually the most inspirational of places because it engendered a great sense of belonging and the children felt valued as people. The school looked outwards not inwards and there was a culture of partnership and participation with even the youngest of children being involved. The school was held together by the way in which both children and staff saw it as being '**our school**'. Even the parents were beginning to see it as such – a big achievement!

Even 5 and 6 year olds called it 'our school' and this sums up what this booklet is all about. The children and staff felt they owned the school and felt that they belonged to it. It was *their* school and everyone who was a part of that school had a share in it. Moreover, they saw the positive relationship between staff and children as being essential to it being a good and successful school with improving academic and social standards.

This booklet is about exploring how you want your school to be defined. It will hopefully offer some thoughts on what you might be able to see in your school, and what you might want for your school. Many schools already are working hard to be a supportive learning community

that people identify with. This booklet can help schools develop that work because it offers an opportunity and reasons to create a *different* sort of school community that people can identify with in a new way, that is owned by you and which is unique in its characteristics.

Although essentially about primary schools, this booklet will also be relevant to colleagues in other settings and organisations. So if you find it of use then please recommend it to others!

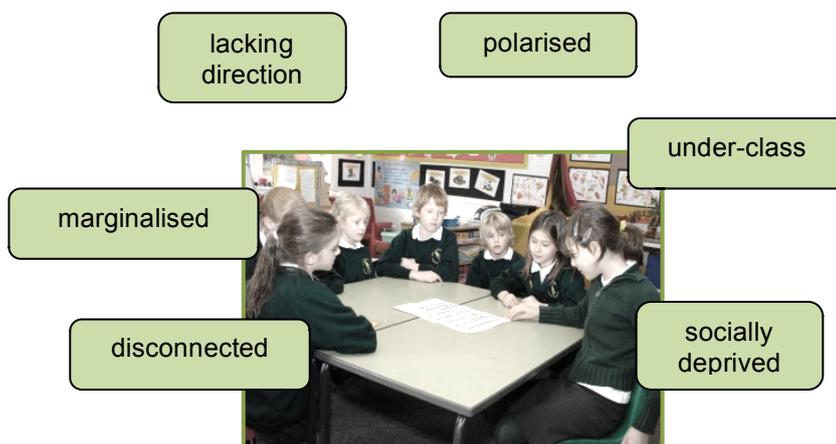
The ideas that lie behind the school community-building strategies in this booklet are not rocket science. Like many of the good things that constitute sound education, they have been around in various forms for a long time. They are quite simply good practice and professional common sense. Unfortunately they are in danger of being squeezed out or sidelined. We need to bring them back to centre stage as a particular vision of what schools as educational communities should be about. As you look at some of the ideas in this booklet you could well find yourself saying, 'but we do some of that already'. And that is brilliant. It might encourage you to do what you are doing in a bigger and better way, with greater confidence, cohesion and determination. And that is better still! Or if you have not thought about community-building strategies before, this booklet will give you a rationale, practical ideas and encouragement.

This booklet takes a holistic approach to what education and the school community can be. We need that perspective. The pressure on schools to focus on, and achieve, against narrow sets of imposed exam and test targets both hinders and distracts us from what should, in many ways, be the real and underlying purpose of good quality education - the ways in which we educate and prepare our children to be:

- ready for, and able to, work;
- life-long learners;
- active and positive members of society.

An 'Our Schools' perspective can help to maintain a right balance in what we are doing. Academic success is important and everyone involved in the education of our young people should strive to achieve the highest possible standards from them and for them. However, educational 'success' has to be seen as more than that. This is where 'Our Schools' comes into its own. Exploring and giving time and energy to what we are as a school community is perfectly compatible with wanting to achieve high standards. A strong school/educational community, that the children feel they belong to, provides the stability, support and security that will allow our young people to grow, develop, learn, achieve and attain high standards of education.

For many young people the only place where they will experience belonging, support and security will be in the school community. Many of our children are growing up in communities that are not nurturing communities. Too often they and their families and friends are identified and labelled with words such as:



Social structures, organisations, informal support networks and groups that could once be taken for granted are no longer there. Values and role models are questioned or undermined and attitudes challenged. It can be really difficult for our young people to find a sense of identity and belonging in their world, if indeed, they see it as **their** world.

Society is increasingly turning to schools to provide our young people with the citizenship and social belonging that they are not getting from others. Expectations of schools can be high (unrealistically high in some quarters) and confused. We expect schools to 'teach' our young people to be citizens with the 'right' values and behaviour, but do we fully recognise the weight these expectations place on schools? Do we appreciate what schools are able to achieve in this area? Schools cannot 'sort out' society's young on their own. However by working in partnership with others, schools can make a significant contribution to young people's sense of belonging. They can also enable children to develop the citizenship values and skills that they need. Schools that function as communities, with members who are active participants both in the school and in the community around the school, make a major contribution to the development of a caring and peaceful society.

'Our Schools' is a powerful and empowering way forward, not in response to what others might be requiring or demanding of us, but because we *believe* that is what our schools should be.

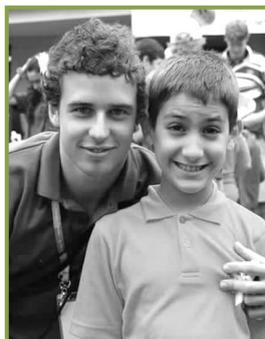
I want to stress that 'Our Schools' is not a one-way-fits-all approach to building a sharing, partnership community in schools. The thoughts, ideas, suggestions and questions in this booklet are meant to stimulate and encourage you. The definition offered is not a blueprint for success but a starting point and framework around which you can build your own 'Our School'. Take what is right for you. I recommend that you follow the 'Round Table' organisation's motto: 'Adopt, Adapt, Improve' so that you can create a unique community school that is a school community which: **grows, laughs, lives, cares, cries, learns, shares and belongs together.**

Being there with each other and for each other. A community where everyone can say, 'This is **MY** school, this is **OUR** school' - and mean it!

Before we can start the process of building a partnership community in school, we need to have a clear picture of what it is we are trying to build. To get that picture we have to:

Understand what we mean by an 'Our School'.

Identify what it might look like in practice.



## 2. What Is An ‘Our School’?

The “Our School” concept or understanding is that of a partnership school community where the adults and children/young people can be identified by, and can identify themselves through, the ways in which they are committed to:

- being an active member of the community;
- being a distinctive, cohesive and supportive learning community built on shared values and aspirations;
- sharing ownership of the school’s ethos, culture and activities;
- participating in shared activities that are to the mutual benefit, growth and enjoyment of all concerned;
- leading, participating and sharing in its educational and social aims and processes.

**The “our School’ partnership community concept is characterised by certain values, behaviours and attitudes which we have grouped under five themes – ‘CRISP’:**

**C**ommonality  
**R**espect  
**I**dentify  
**S**haring  
**P**articipation



**Commonality** - a key feature of an ‘Our School’ is that its people look to what they have in common. This does not mean that everyone has to do the same things or be the same. The school celebrates individuality but is also proactive about enjoying, recognising and building on the many things that everyone has in common.

**Respect** - everyone has the right to be respected. However, with that right come responsibilities. It is the right of everyone to be respected but that respect has to be earned by both adults and young people. It is also everyone’s responsibility to show respect to others. Respect underpins all relationships, activities and expectations within the school. It extends out beyond the school and the school works to be respected by, and to respect, the community of which it is a part.

**Identity** - the school tries to build its own unique identity. This is recognised by those who see it and it is owned by those who have a share in it. Everyone feels a sense of belonging. There is also an emphasis on the positives that group identity can bring. Being part of ‘the group’ is important but of equal importance is valuing people as individuals. Everyone is encouraged to develop their own identity, they are given the space to be themselves and they are helped to recognise who they are. Part of that personal identity is formed by the many groups that each one of us belongs to. A successful ‘Our School’ tries to promote a healthy and positive balance between individualism and collectivism. Everyone works hard to challenge negative group stereotyping!

**Sharing** - sharing is a special feature of an 'Our School'. There is an extensive network of sharing relationships that involves all members of the school community. Education is seen as a two-way relationship where those who teach also learn and where those who learn also teach. This partnership is seen as having a real value. The sharing partnership is also reflected in the way the school is managed and the many activities that happen within it. All have a share in what is decided, what is done and how. It is a relationship and way of working that can be seen mirrored through the way in which the different adults within the school community work together. This does not mean that it can, or should, be an equal partnership. What it does mean though is that the adults believe in the ability and right of the pupils to be involved with making decisions, to be leaders and to be involved and empowered.

**Participation** - pupils in 'Our Schools' participate in a wide range of ways as:

- active learning partners and peer learning mentors;
- doers and organisers;
- developmental decision-makers;
- members of clubs etc.;
- pastoral peer supporters;
- community activists.

Participation is judged in terms of both its quality and the numbers who take part. The school endeavours to make the participation base as wide as possible by looking at lots of different ways to get people involved. There is a culture of 'participation expectation'! Such then are the broadest brushstrokes of defining and identifying an '**Our School**'. The five **CRISP** themes should permeate all aspects of school life.

In the next section we will begin to explore in more detail what might be found or seen in an 'Our School'.



### **3. What Does An ‘Our School’ Look Like?**

The following list does not draw a definitive picture of what an ‘Our School’ should look like. It’s not painting by numbers! It is, however, meant to be a strong guide to what we ought to expect, given our understanding of what they are about. Some of these elements will be present, some won’t. Others will need to be seen in terms of their position on a continuum or having the same purpose but a different format.

#### **Pupils are not ‘given’ a voice – the voice they have already is listened to!**

‘Our Schools’ don’t give pupils a voice. Instead they recognise that every child has a voice and has the RIGHT to use their voice and be involved – just as every adult does.

The phrase ‘giving pupils a voice’ implies that it is up to adults as to whether they give it (or not) and therefore they can take it away should they choose. But because having a voice/say is a RIGHT, it cannot be taken away – though you could deprive people of the opportunity to use it!

An ‘Our School’ believes in the right of children to use their voice and in the fundamental importance of involving them in the life of the school. An ‘Our School’ makes sure that they are involved. Participation goes beyond pupils being consulted or having a say to them being active ‘doers’.

Studying the decisions that ‘Our School’ pupils are involved in making will show that they have a real impact on the life and development of the school. There are ongoing opportunities to take the initiative in the decision-making process and adults look to ways in which children’s involvement can be expanded and developed. They also accept decisions that pupils have been involved in making.

The right to be involved is written into all appropriate mission and ethos statements so that all can see and understand what the school believes in.

#### **Everyone is involved**

Although the emphasis here is on the children and young people, it is of fundamental importance that *everyone* can say: ‘This is our school!’. It is the right of everyone to be involved and given appropriate and honest opportunities to be so. Participation includes pupils *and* all the adults who form the school community – parents, non-teaching staff, governors and relevant outside agencies / support workers. All need to be included for there to be a *culture* of it being ‘Our School’.

#### **There is a commitment to partnership and sharing**

‘Our Schools’ are committed to having a culture of partnership and sharing. Sharing is about enjoying the mutual benefits of positive school experiences and education. People share their time, knowledge, skills, and values. Being partners does not mean that everyone has to do and decide everything together. Partnership accepts and works on the understanding that we have different skills, abilities, responsibilities, interests and duties. The key factor is that there is a commitment to sharing and that are opportunities and structures for sharing. When looking at the school you can see many examples and levels of pupils and adults sharing in different ways.

#### **Children are considered to be able**

There is a belief in even very young children’s ability to make decisions, to do things and then take responsibility for what they have decided and done. This is shown through the

ways in which they are given opportunities to be leaders, decision-makers and participants in all aspects of school life including management and organisation.

There is a common attitude of '*Can we do it? Yes we can!*' amongst the young people. Adults encourage that confidence.

The children's participation and contribution to community life (in and out of school) is recorded as part of their achievement.

### **There is a proactive approach**

'Our Schools' can be distinguished by the way in which they take a proactive approach to building a participating, partnership community. The quality and nature of the 'Our School' culture is kept under review and its extension and enhancement form an ongoing element in the school's development and improvement planning.

### **Inclusion**

The school seeks to identify individuals and groups of children who might become socially excluded and include them in activities and processes. They might be pupils or groups excluded and/or sidelined by others or because they might self-exclude for various reasons. Pupils and groups are monitored by staff to identify those who are not participating and getting involved.

Reasons for why this might be happening are sought and strategies put in place to encourage and facilitate their involvement and engagement with the life of the school community.

### **Information and Communications**

As part of the sharing culture, the young people are kept in the loop about what is happening in the school. Things are explained to them and they are automatically part of the formal and informal information-sharing network.

This does not mean that they have to know everything and have everything explained to them. Instead it means that there is an appropriate openness aimed at promoting belonging through knowledge and understanding of what is happening.

Schools give a lot of attention to cultural, disability and language accessibility and it is right that they do. 'Our Schools' go one step further and put the same effort into ensuring that there is no age discrimination around communications. The school aims to ensure that pupils of all ages should be able to access school information and letters etc.

Displays are children-friendly in that they are put at levels appropriate for the children to see and read them and they are designed in a way that they can connect with.

The school asks: are newsletters sent out using words that pupils can understand?

Where possible, 'Our School' children are involved in putting together things like displays and newsletters because they are about them and they affect their school lives.

## Leadership

Young people can be very effective leaders of the school community given the right opportunities and support. 'Pupils as leaders' is a strong feature of successful 'Our Schools'. Not only are they given the opportunity to take part in activities, there is an expectation that they will lead them as well.

Pupils are trained to lead!



## People feel valued

A sense of feeling valued permeates all parts of **Our Schools**. People of all ages are valued, and feel valued:

- a. as an individual;
- b. as part of a group or groups within the school, eg a house or year cohort;
- c. by the others in that group;
- d. as a member of the whole school community;
- e. by others inside and outside the school.

That culture of valuing in different ways is understood, articulated and promoted.

## Diversity and cohesion

Pupils are encouraged to express their identity as:

- a) individuals,
- b) members of groups,
- c) part of the whole school community.

There is strong cohesion within and between groups. People are encouraged to be proud of who they are, the school and all the groups they belong to and to take responsibility for each other in those different groupings. Pupils are taught to recognise social and cultural cohesion and diversity as being compatible not contradictory. The school seeks to focus and build on what unites people and everyone is respected for who they are. There is a genuine enjoyment of what makes people both the same and different.

All in the school community use naturally positive (not contrived) language around diversity and cohesion.

## Purpose

There is shared purpose to what the school is doing and aims to be. Pupils are helped to understand school life and empowered to own that sense of shared purpose in ways that they can understand and articulate. They know that they are an important part of developing the ethos, culture, physical and emotional environment.

## Celebrating and crying!

Pupils are enabled and empowered to be emotionally supportive to each other both formally and informally. That is the expectation in an 'Our School' because it proudly shares and celebrates together special times and events in the life of individuals, the school, groups and the community.

It is also a community that shares the difficult times and supports each other through them – 'Our Schools' are not afraid to cry together!



## Risks

Pupils are encouraged to take risks in a safe and secure environment. There is a positive attitude towards having a go and taking risks. The school promotes a 'learning' approach to what others might be quick to label as 'failure'.

The school isn't afraid to take risks and try new things.

## Evolving

The school sees itself as an evolving community that changes as different individuals and cohorts come and go. There is a holding-on to the traditions that are its identity, whilst looking forward to what new people and times can bring.

Activities and structures are monitored and reviewed to make sure they are relevant to the school community.

Pupils are helped to review, reflect on and assess what the school does for them as individuals and others. It also encourages them to revisit what they can offer to the school as they grow as people. 'Our Schools' also think about the ways in which things are done, to ensure that they are done in ways that best meet people's needs.

## Understanding

Pupils understand and can talk about what makes their school an 'Our School'.

Adults believe that it is important to take sufficient time to develop this understanding and to build-in ways of helping pupils with this understanding.

## Active and democratic classrooms

Active and democratic classrooms are a key feature of 'Our Schools'. Such classrooms have a culture whereby pupils are guiding and owning their own learning through continuous decision-making dialogue with the classroom adults and peers. It is an environment in which pupils are frequently and purposefully moving around, working in groups and pairs, as well as working as a whole class and as individuals. All pupils and adults accept their responsibility for the process. Success is celebrated by everyone in the classroom. The classroom is a place where both pupils and adults feel safe to explore, experiment and fail.

*There are some more thoughts on active and democratic classrooms at the end of this booklet.*



## Community

People in the community identify with the school as 'our school'. The school seeks to be actively involved with the local community at different levels. It gets involved with community events, issues and activities as a partner.

Pupils are given opportunities to understand and be good citizens locally and globally. The school also pursues a global perspective to community involvement. Opportunities are sought for pupils to engage with schools and communities around the world in a way that reflects the respect of a true partnership and not always just as fundraisers.

## Safe and secure

Pupils see the school as a safe, secure and consistent environment - emotionally and physically. They play a key role in making it such and feel that they own approaches to:

- rewards,
- sanctions,
- rules,
- expectations,
- the prevention of bullying,
- restorative justice,
- pastoral care.

Parents / carers feel emotionally safe when they come into school with concerns etc.

## Happy

'Our Schools' are happy schools because people:

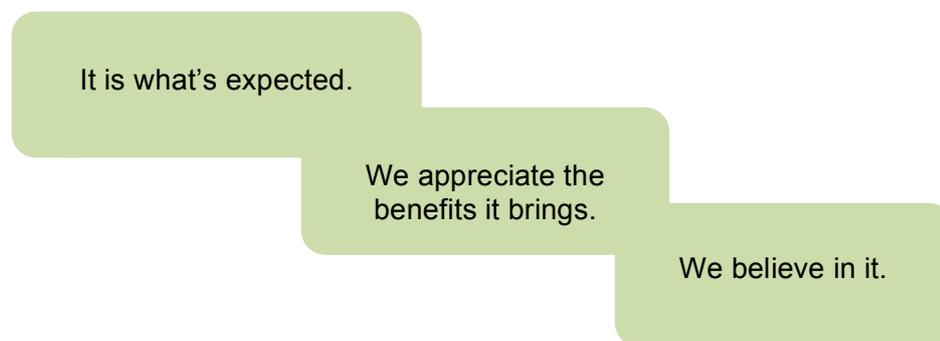
- laugh with each other a lot;
- know that they belong and matter;
- know that they have helped to make it what it is;
- feel trusted and can take responsibility;
- care and share;
- use positive language about partnerships, community and participation.



#### **4. Why Be An 'Our School'?**

Having taking a look at some of the things that identify a school as being an 'Our School', we can now turn our thoughts towards thinking about why we should want to build such a community.

There are three basic reasons:



'It is what's expected' - one of the reasons for building an 'Our School' is a 'response-driven approach' ie to do it primarily to meet external requirements. Things are done because it is what outside agencies and other organisations expect the school to do.

'We appreciate the benefits it brings' - at the other end of the scale there is the 'ethos-driven approach' to building an 'Our School'. We do it because we believe in it and it is what we want the school to be, regardless of any external requirements/pressures.

'We believe in it' - 'Our Schools' can be the result of a 'benefits-driven approach' - we aim to build one because we appreciate the many benefits that it will bring.

Clearly these three approaches are far from being mutually exclusive and can all impact on our decisions at any one time. The strongest approach will be the ethos-driven one. Building an 'Our School' because we believe in it is more likely to have a deeper impact and longer-lasting results than the others. Not everyone, though, will be able to take on board and share in that culture and values.

In some ways the response-driven approach is the easiest to implement particularly when people are not convinced about the possible implications of building a culture of partnership and participation. Using 'others' and external requirements as our 'excuse' for what we do, allows people space and gives them the opportunity to validate in their own minds why they are doing something that they might not believe in.

The benefits-driven approach can also help the unsure in taking on board new ways. If people can see how a new strategy or different approach will impact in a positive way on their working practices or what they are being expected to achieve, it will encourage their involvement and commitment.

Understanding the different reasons for building a culture of partnership and participation can help to ensure its successful adoption and outcomes. Staff, pupils and parents will be coming to new ideas and approaches from different angles. Understanding what those angles might be and how to use the three basic reasons outlined is a key management skill essential to the introduction and implementation of all developmental activities, especially when such things might be seen as radical and taking people out of their comfort zone, particularly at a time when they might be feeling pressurised by expectations.

## **5. The Benefits Of An 'Our School' Approach**

There are huge benefits to be gained from adopting an 'Our School' culture of partnership and participation.

They can be divided into three broad groups:

- benefits to the individual;
- benefits to the school;
- benefits to the community.



### **Benefits to the individual can include:**

- improving what the school is able to do for you as an individual;
- ensuring your best interests;
- raising your aspirations for what you can achieve;
- empowering and equipping you to do lots of different things;
- developing independence;
- increasing self-confidence and self-belief;
- gaining the ability to understand and take responsibility for what you do;
- feeling valued for who you are and feeling you belong;
- improving your academic achievements through security and active learning;
- feeling included/no longer feeling excluded;
- the experience of partnership work with others will give you skills for life;
- acquiring leadership skills;
- a better understanding of, and respect for, adults and vice-versa;
- a better understanding of your learning through helping others to learn;
- being happier because you are more in control of your life;
- more ways of developing your inter-personal skills and relationships;
- the ability to plan, prioritise, organise and review learning as well as life skills and activities;
- understanding how to do things and how things get done;
- a better understanding of difference and diversity;
- a greater sense of direction and purpose because you know that you can change things;
- better communication skills by being involved with lots of things and people.

- In addition to all of the above, a culture of partnership and participation can contribute to the development of your inner peace. Having that sense of belonging, the security of being part of the school community, the consistency of a school environment that the child knows and understands, appreciating that they are valued for who they are and the opportunity to be themselves can all help to develop, deepen and enhance the experiencing of inner peace for our children and young people.

### **Benefits to the school:**

- the promotion of inclusion and an inclusive culture combined with reduced feelings and experiences of exclusion within the school;
- enhanced respect by others for the school and greater school self-respect;
- a physical, emotional and social environment that is relevant to the needs of the school population;
- a happier environment;
- improved behaviour because of pupils taking responsibility for themselves and each other;
- the reassurance of knowing that it is focused on meeting the real needs of the school community;
- a strong sense of community cohesion and identity;
- more relevant resources because the 'users' are involved in their selection and deployment;
- committed adults;
- improved standards of teaching and learning;
- diversity of thinking;
- raised levels of achievement;
- supported and supportive pupils, staff and parents;
- being respected by their community and valued as an active community partner;
- positive and supportive peer networks;
- delivering holistic education;
- greater community integration and input;
- the increased energies that people give to things when they feel that they have ownership of them.
- Just as the 'Our Schools' approach can support and promote personal/inner peace, it can also make a significant contribution to the promotion of peaceful relationships that should be at the heart of 'Our Schools'.

**Benefits to the community:**

- improved citizenship;
- improved mutual respect through better understanding and shared relationships;
- the challenging of negative community stereotyping;
- supportive links because the community shares in the school and vice-versa;
- new community perspectives;
- greater engagement by young people (and families) in community life away from school;
- young people empowered to change and lead their community now and tomorrow;
- positive understanding of global difference and diversity;
- new perspectives on the world;
- the potential for greater environmental awareness because a community partnership can make it 'theirs';
- improved and increased global citizenship;
- a better understanding of global inter-dependence;
- The community benefits of partnership and participation will also help to promote and develop both peaceful relationships and an understanding of what global peace can mean in real terms.



## **6. Building 'Our School' Strategies**

This chapter explores ways in which an ethos and culture of partnership can be built and fostered. As you look at the different ideas it is important that you see them as a range of possibilities rather than a prescriptive list. Together, or in part, they can form a framework around which to build the right 'Our School' culture for *your* school. Some, I am sure, will already be in place, others might offer a new look at things. Elements of it may not be for you. It is divided into four sections:

1. Auditing your current position.
2. Exploring our understanding of partnership and participation.
3. Factors affecting what you can do.
4. Possible 'Our School' strategies.

### **Section 1 – Auditing your current position**

A useful starting point for auditing what is in place in your school could be to ask four key questions:

- What does the school already do in relation to partnership, participation and the community?
- What are the attitudes of adults and young people to the 'Our School' culture, partnership and participation?
- What experiences have people had of partnership and participation?
- What are people's expectations and understanding of an 'Our School', partnership and participation?

Together these four questions can provide the crucial information needed to review and build an 'Our School' approach. Given that people are at the core of what we are doing, it is important to include attitudes, expectations and experiences as part of the baseline data as they will have a huge impact on what can be achieved and how to go about doing things. *Don't just think in terms of the attitudes found in school – include those of parents and the community because they will have a big impact as well.*

It might also be useful to assess where the school is against the following four partnership and participation cultures. They are not designed to be neat boxes into which the school can be placed, but rather pointers along a continuum. A Recipient Culture will be towards one end of the line with a Partnership Culture at the other. Evaluating where the school is against them can help to clarify the school's current ethos and practices and support the process of identifying building priorities.

#### **Recipient Culture**

Pupils are not consulted or consultation is limited and tokenistic. The children are told what to do and are only occasionally told what is happening. Senior staff make nearly all decisions. Pupils are seen as the recipients of education. There is limited active learning. Adults set the agenda and any decisions that might be made by pupils have only a minor impact. There might be a token school council controlled by staff. A minority of pupils participate in activities arranged by staff.

**Consultation Culture:**

There is limited consultation with a small amount of discussion about what to do. Pupils are often told about what is happening and sometimes have them explained. Children's views are taken into account by staff. Pupils have limited power to make decisions and are largely seen as the recipients of education. There is some active learning. Staff exert a lot of influence, and have quite a lot of control over the school council. Pupils might help to run some activities. A lot of children take part in a range of activities.

**Participation Culture:**

Pupils are given some power to make autonomous decisions but parameters are overtly and covertly set by staff. Pupils are given a voice. This is seen as important by the adults. Consultation often uses appropriately chosen samples of children. Pupil-led decisions have an impact but don't upset the status quo - changes made are small and specific. There is a recognition that participation can be beneficial. A significant number of pupils take part in a wide range of activities. Pupils are expected to share the leadership of some things.

**Partnership Culture:**

There is an ethos of partnership that permeates all aspects of school life. Involvement is seen as the right of the child. It is understood and valued by both adults and children. The benefits are sought as being part of the school ethos. There is widespread and on-going consultation between staff and pupils with strategies and structures in place to support the children's involvement.

Pupils are expected to take on roles of responsibility. There is a proactive approach towards the partnership and participation culture. Pupils are involved in making significant changes. The school council is autonomous with adults as equal members and/or advisors. A significant majority of pupils are involved in a wide range of activities, many of which are run by pupils.

**Section 2 - Exploring our understanding of partnership and participation**

Partnership and participation are both central to the 'Our School' culture. They are terms that we can come across time and again in relation to schools and education. In order to build a successful 'Our School' it is important that *everyone* in the school has a clear and shared understanding of what they mean for each particular setting.

Different understandings and expectations can quickly result in:

- side-tracking, hijacking, or uncoordinated and inconsistent things being put in place;
- insecure or unstable development;
- inertia;
- unnecessary repetition;
- disaffection and disengagement;

- distrust and children / adults who feel betrayed,

The blocks can soon topple and fall apart if we don't talk the same 'Our School' language.



Some thoughts on partnership, meetings and participation:

- partnership does not mean that everyone has to be involved with everything;
- partnership can be about sharing why you cannot be involved;
- young people are good at identifying what it is inappropriate for them to be involved with;
- partnership working needs specific skills;
- people are often in a whole network of different partnerships;
- partnerships can be for something specific and for a set period of time;
- partnership is about mutual benefit – adults have to be open to receiving as well as giving;
- successful partnerships are built on trust, respect and understanding;
- be clear as to why you are partners.

## Meetings

Meetings are one of those fundamentals of community life. They are something we do at many levels but how often do we think about *how* we do them? The careful management of meetings underpins a successful partnership in schools. This does not mean that they have to be stage-managed. Doing that would be using power to covertly manipulate people. That is not good practice either ethically or practically. It is, however about taking time to appreciate some of the factors that can impact on them. It will be time well spent as it can help to ensure that meetings are a positive and productive experience that encourages rather than deflates and disengages.

A successful 'Our School' culture can be both helped and hindered by the way in which we approach and understand meetings. Some of the questions we might want to ask include:

- Is it perceived as being dominated by one person or group – this could be adults and/or pupils?
- Timing – is it at the right time for people and of an appropriate length for both the agenda and people's concentration levels?
- Do people have the meeting skills needed in order to take part?
- Do people understand their role?
- Do people feel that the meetings are tokenistic or have a hidden agenda?
- Is time being used effectively?
- Do meetings stay focused?

- Is there a clear understanding of the meeting's purpose?
- Are the right people at the meeting?

One of the main reasons meetings aren't always as successful as they might be is because the wrong people are at them. We need to be sure that we are targeting the people we *need* to be there – not always those who want or think they should be!

Another influencing factor is that there can often be misunderstanding as to what the purpose of the meeting or agenda item is about. If people are expecting to make a decision when the actual purpose is discussion, then there may be frustrations and disengagement. Always be clear and make sure everyone appreciates the purpose of what you are all doing. Is the meeting or item about:



Participation is not a simple 'yes' or 'no' around whether an individual or group is involved or not. We are often at different levels of engagement and involvement between the following two poles:

### Low Level of Engagement

The individual or group

- chooses to disengage with partnership and participation activities;
- has no interest in the concept and processes of participation and partnership;
- only participates because he/she has to;
- makes little or no effort to be part of the community;
- can actively undermine the partnership and participation culture.

### High Level of Engagement

The individual or group

- is highly motivated towards partnership and participation opportunities and activities;
- believes in participation;
- looks for opportunities to participate and does so as fully as possible;
- identifies with, and plays an active part in the community;
- is pro-active in promoting and sharing the partnership and participation culture.

Clearly, the point where an adult or child is on the continuum between a low and a high level of engagement is not fixed, so if we are seeking to develop an 'Our School' culture the aim has to be to help people move towards the characteristics found in high levels of engagement.

People will also be at a different point with different types of participation. A child might be highly engaged with clubs and activities but at a low level of engagement with learning.

A wide range of factors will influence where a person is between the two poles. These can include:

- school expectations;
- experiences;
- peer culture;
- community culture and values;
- personal values;
- personal expectations;
- perceived motives;
- family values and expectations;
- self-belief.



It is also useful to remember that participation can be as an individual or as part of a group, with outcomes that impact on themselves and others:

- in the group;
- in their immediate world;
- in the community;
- outside their immediate contact.

### **Section 3 - Factors affecting the building of an 'Our School' community**

Rather than listing all the factors that might affect how successful we can be in building an 'Our School' culture, we can explore them by looking at some more questions you might need or want to be asking.

- What are the different attitudes towards a culture of partnership and participation? Who is approaching it with enthusiasm and acceptance and who with apathy or maybe with resistance and opposition?

- Can you sustain what you want to do? Projects, initiatives and approaches can sometimes fail because their ongoing sustainability hasn't been thought through in enough detail.
- What do people perceive 'Our Schools' as being about? Do people have differing expectations? Do they sit comfortably together?
- Is there the time to achieve what you want to achieve?
- Is there an appropriate management and organisational infrastructure in place to build on?
- What experiences are people bringing to 'Our Schools'? Have they been positive, negative or non-existent for people?
- Both adults and young people will bring a whole range of skills to the building of 'Our School'. What are they bringing? Do people have the skills needed?
- Have you got the pace of change right? People need time to absorb and embed new things without feeling under pressure. Keep up the momentum though!
- What other commitments and priorities has the school got? Can you give things the focus and energies they need?
- Are the human and material resources available to achieve what you want to put into place?
- What sort of leadership is there? What style does it take? Do people understand leadership?
- Are people willing to be led?
- What will be the impact of what you might be hoping to do? When something impacts it can cause a huge ripple effect! Are you ready for these ripples? How will you support people when they are taken out of their comfort zone?
- Are you able to unfreeze existing attitudes and practices? Is it possible to dismantle existing organisational structures? What do you need to hold on to, or keep for now, in order to introduce new things?
- How are people finding the process of change and potentially new ways of working? Is it enjoyable, fulfilling and rewarding or a nuisance, or maybe a total nightmare?!

At this point it is worth taking a brief look at **leadership**. Leadership is a fundamental part of the 'Our Schools' and the building of a partnership and participation culture because:

- they can only succeed if there is effective leadership;
- the support of senior management (including governors) is essential;
- an effective 'Our School' needs lots of leadership styles and strategies;
- young people and adults need to be trained to lead.

If we want our young people to become effective leaders within the school community and beyond, we have to give them both the opportunity to lead and the skills they will need.

Whilst we wouldn't expect a child to successfully use and apply a mathematical skills that they hadn't been taught, time and again we inadvertently project them towards leadership failure because we don't equip them to lead before expecting them to do so.

The style of leadership and the way in which leadership is exercised throughout the school has to be in tune with the partnership and participation culture and ethos. A strong 'top down' approach to leadership and management might struggle to promote and maintain a culture of partnership working. This does not mean that it has to be purely 'bottom up' leadership – that just doesn't work either!

In order to build and establish effective '**Our School**' leadership you might want to reflect on the following:

- Effective leaders can draw on a lot of different skills and qualities including:
  - empathy,
  - vision,
  - purpose,
  - determination,
  - flexibility.
- They have the ability to:
  - communicate clearly;
  - listen;
  - delegate;
  - see potential in people;
  - encourage;
  - move people;
  - evaluate;
  - anticipate;
  - juggle;
  - be the person they are;
  - SMILE.
- Leadership is not necessarily the same as authority. We might have the authority to make people conform to what we decide but a true leader takes people with him/her. People follow by choice and not through duty or fear.
- Delegation is about being happy to see something done in a way that you wouldn't do it and leave it alone!
- Leadership is not about going it alone – you have to have someone to lead.
- An effective leader knows when to lead:
  - from the front;
  - from the rear;
  - by stealth;
  - through others;
  - by delegation;
  - by inspiration;
  - by example.

We need to be sure that our young people are able to adopt different management styles in their own leadership and find ways and means to let them develop leadership skills in both the classroom and through posts of responsibility.

#### **Section 4 - Possible 'Our School' strategies could include:**

- A whole school vision of what you believe in and want the school to be.
- A mission statement or motto that reflects the 'Our School' ethos.
- Exploring ways in which the vision statement or motto is displayed, shared and used.
- Pupil involvement in the publication of school information and documents.
- Older pupils work with, and mentor, younger ones to facilitate their involvement with things.
- A code of conduct that reflects the spirit of partnership and establishes pupil ownership of it.
- Exploring the ways in which the school's vision statement is reflected in policies, shown on documents and displayed around the school.
- The range of 'responsibility posts' there are in the school. Younger pupils can shadow older ones for experience.
- Pupils as observers for teachers. Working together, pupils act as classroom observers collecting information for teachers as part of the teacher's CPD. This needs to be set up carefully and with clear parameters and training for pupils. Pupils do not assess teaching but collect information for the teacher, for example, how often they interact with a particular group.
- Teaching and learning approaches that move closer to the Active and Democratic classroom model as defined earlier.
- Peer marking of work and peers as critical learning friends – learning partnerships.
- Asking pupils what clubs and activities they would like if they could be provided.
- Young people trained to be club leaders with an adult supporter in the background.
- Community involvement with clubs and activities – as a community and individuals.
- Thinking about the opportunities pupils have for putting forward ideas. These could include suggestion boxes and School Council members holding 'surgeries'.
- Pupil/governor link partnerships for different aspects of school life and management. Each governor is linked to a particular pupil or group of pupils and works with them on an area of school life/governor responsibility – bearing in mind confidentiality and appropriateness.
- A report from the School Council on the agenda for each meeting of the governing body.
- Regular meetings between governors and pupils.
- Pupils on governors' committees.

- Review the Personal, Social, Health, Citizenship and Economic Education programme of study to ensure that it equips pupils with the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to take on leadership, partnership and participation roles effectively.
- A pupil citizenship award. This should be run and chosen by the pupils. They establish what they consider to be good school citizenship and then give awards to pupils who achieve the criteria. Adults can be partners in this, but ensure that it does not become a staff award to pupils.
- Pupils as good role models. This could be extended to having a school role-model display including pupils selecting people from the outside world who they think are good citizenship role models.
- Extending the peer mentoring that takes place. If there are Playground Pals, have Dining Room Pals ones as well!
- A Pupil Pastoral Support Network across the school. Train Pastoral Supporters to help staff to identify pupils with problems and then work with staff to offer them peer support if appropriate.
- School Ministers instead of a School Council.
  - Pupils elect a small team (the Cabinet) each with a specific ministerial responsibility in the school, such as a Minister for Education, Minister for the Environment, Minister for Communications, Pastoral Minister and a Minister for Sports.
  - Cabinet meetings are held regularly to co-ordinate activities. They are chaired by the Chief Minister (or School Prime Minister) who is the official representative of the pupils at events.
  - Although the number of representatives might be cut, more pupils can be involved in a practical way because each Minister has a team of pupils taken from different age groups to support him/her with the projects that the Ministry wants to work on in the school.
  - Each Minister has an adult mentor. This takes the workload off one teacher and enables adults to be involved with things that interest them.
  - The work of the Ministers is supported by a School Parliament. This can have representatives from each class/cohort. It might only meet once a term to debate issues or ratify/approve Cabinet decisions.
  - For example - the Cabinet might propose some charities to support, the Parliament debates and chooses which. The Parliament would ratify any work done on the school's Behaviour Policy.
  - Having pupil Ministers extends the involvement base, significantly increases pupil leadership, decision-making and responsibilities and helps to teach children about politics in a real way.
  - It can also make a big contribution to self-esteem, aspirations, communication and inter-personal skills.
- Pupil-led celebration of more things together.
- Pupil-organised class and school birthday books so that people can be sent a school card.

- Pupil-led celebration wall recognising peer achievements outside school.
- Pupils could be involved in organising the celebration of class and school achievements.
- Expanding the number and range of events done together as a school or year groups and developing pupil involvement in planning and leading them.
- Pupil representatives on the PTFA/Friends.
- Opportunities for pupils to be part of the regular consultation meetings with parents.
- Local and global links/projects.
- Work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Develop pupils' identification and challenging of negative stereotyping.
- A pupils' school log book and history of the school.
- Participation in, and the instigating of, community environmental projects.
- Pupil involvement with local issues.
- Community involvement with school events such as running a stall at sports day, helping with refreshments at concerts and community information stands at consultation evenings.
- Explore the timing of events to make them more accessible to parents.
- Look at the school premises from the perspective of a community resource. Can better use be made of them in an affordable way?
- Information sent out/shared via the PTFA and pupils (rather than 'the school') some times.
- Monitoring systems to target pupils and groups who might be at risk of being excluded from participation.
- Establish specific cluster school networking which pupils can lead and run.
- Put a time limit on some activities so that people don't have to commit longer than they can sustain.
- Find time to share things that are happening in the news with pupils.
- A proactive approach to promoting the positive language of 'Our Schools' with both adults and young people for example - talk inclusively not exclusively, cohesively not divisively.
- Review teaching, the curriculum and practices in order to develop understanding of:
  - interdependence;

- causes;
- consequences of our actions and decisions;
- ways of showing shared identity;
- negative and positive group cultures.

'Our School' is not just about what we do for, and with, pupils! Make sure that partnership and participation strategies and practices are followed for staff as well!

'Our Schools' can make schools a happier, healthier and more peaceful place for all who form the school community. It is about what we do, but more than that it is about why and how we do it. The strategies and structures that we adopt are the visible outcomes of an 'Our School'. The beliefs and motivations are what define it.

As already made clear, the thoughts and ideas shared over the past few pages are not a blueprint way to approach an 'Our School', but hopefully they are a starting point that you can take from, and build on, to create what is right for you.

'Adopt, adapt, improve' so that everyone who is a part of the school community can say, know, believe and prove that this is an 'OUR SCHOOL'!!!



## **7. The United Nations Convention On The Rights Of The Child**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a major commitment by the countries of the world to establish the fundamental rights of all children regardless of their race, creed, beliefs or age. The UK Government is a signatory to it, and so the Convention underpins all aspects of work with children in this country. Its articles are reflected in both national legislation and the purpose of the many organisations (both statutory and voluntary) that promote and support the health and well-being of our children.

In 1948 the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This applied to both adults and children. A growing awareness of the rights of children resulted in the UN General Assembly adopting the second Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959. This was not legally binding as it was a statement of intent based around 10 principles working towards the best interests of the child.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> November 1989 the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child as international law. The UK Government signed up to the convention on the 19<sup>th</sup> April 1990 and ratified it on the 16<sup>th</sup> December 1991. It came into force on the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1992.

As of November 2009, 194 countries (including all members of the UN) have signed up to the UNCRC. Only 2 (the USA and Somalia) have not yet ratified it.

Two additional optional protocols were adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2000. The first (adopted by 153 countries) concerns the involvement of children in armed conflict and states that there should be no compulsory recruitment of children under 18 into a country's armed forces. The second has been adopted by 167 nations and concerns the sale of children for child prostitution and child pornography.

The UNCRC is made up of 54 articles. Articles 1 to 41 set out children's rights and the corresponding duties of governments to safeguard them. Articles 42 to 54 are about the ways in which the UN, governments and adults should work together to ensure that all children can access their rights.

To make the UNCRC more accessible to young people, and easier to use, the 41 articles that are at the heart of children's rights can be combined into the following 10 'principles':

### **All children in the world have the right to:**

- live in a clean safe place;
- food and clean water;
- be a child;
- be part of a caring family;
- keep some things private;
- be kept safe and well;
- be treated in the same fair way;
- go to school;
- have a say in things that affect them;
- be the special person they are.



## **8. Some More Thoughts On 'Active and Democratic' Classroom:**

- give clear instructions;
- have clear ground rules;
- movement is part of classroom working culture;
- plan well – including the use of space;
- value divergent thinking;
- don't expect instant silence;
- don't be afraid to follow-up worthwhile digressions;
- model the standards you expect;
- work in different ways;
- train pupils to work in groups;
- don't intervene in groups unless they are going wrong or you are asked for help;
- work positively on group dynamics – return responsibility to the group;
- only allow supportive comments;
- be clear about what they have control over;
- peer marking is a powerful tool;
- give pupils the chance to be the expert;
- work on group cohesion;
- as much as possible allow pupils to decide how they use time, present work, how they are going to work, how to solve problems, and sanctions to be used;
- aim to give three lots of praise for every one piece of criticism;
- allow pupils to answer each other's questions as much as possible;
- it is OK to laugh!

