

A Rose and No Thorns

On a cold and wet Wigan morning in late autumn the sunflowers stood tall over the school's organic gardening patch.

The students in the spotless corridors also stood tall, the majority with smiles on their faces, as they strode purposely between lessons.

Rose Bridge is no ordinary high school. The headmaster lets every pupil know that if sees them not smiling, he will ask them what's the matter.

It is, in fact, a school that puts great emphasis on what matters. First and foremost it rejects a common belief that in challenging locales schools tend towards maximum inclusion, or maximum achievement. Rose Bridge looks for both. And it spectacularly scores on both.

It also refuses to draw a straight line between material deprivation and academic underachievement. There are things called expectations in the middle. And they can be exploded.

The agenda is that no-one falls through the net. Indeed, there is no net – everywhere there are solid foundations for each and every individual. “Nothing must get in the way of learning” is first of the two central mantras. “Everything is about respect” is the other.

Not that everything is always rosy in Ince and in Rose Bridge itself – far from it. But it's the way that the predictable and the exceptional are anticipated and planned for that makes the stunning difference. There are no hidden thorns on which youngsters can become stuck. Everything is about forwards momentum.

It's very easy to lapse into stereotyping and disabling miserabilism when describing an area like Ince. On the outskirts of Wigan, Ince is very much in its “post” phase, as in post-coal and post-cotton. It's been there for a quite a long time and it would be hard to argue that the area is a shining exemplar of urban regeneration.

Suffice it to say, Ince scores strongly on the multiple types of indicators of social deprivation that feature the likes of early mortality and teenage pregnancy.

Headmaster Jack Pendlebury knows all of this but he doesn't let it put him in a straitjacket. He's been head there for approaching seven years but his experience goes right back into the era of Secondary Moderns.

“In those days the ethos was very much about care and safety and other things that were good of themselves – but it was not primarily about achievement.

“And some of that has lingered on in certain ways. In a school like ours, inclusion and achievement agendas don't always work together,” explains the highly visible head, who walks the length and breadth of his school every day at least once, often more.

Rose Bridge has developed radical approaches and solutions across the full span of its activities – and these start the second students walk through the door in the morning. When they come into school, they stay in school in all but the most exceptional of circumstances – and they are very, very few and far between. There have been no exclusions in over four years.

We'd never heard of anything like "The Bridge" before and didn't know what to expect – but we knew that it would be an acid test of Rose Bridge's alluring philosophies tested in the heat of hardcore educational challenges.

There was a mixture of anger and fear on some of their faces. These struck us as potentially the kind of situations where otherwise some kids might tumble out of the school system, with their next appearance on the State's radar quite possibly a collision with the Youth Offending system.

Not here, though – The Bridge is designed to constantly close the gap between potential exclusion and sustainable inclusion.

This is Rose Bridge's unique attempt to level the playing field, to marginalise the marginalising effects of Ince, all within the constraints a modest-sized "temporary" classroom, that, in the way of schools everywhere, has long since become permanent.

Emotional, physical, material or behavioural – this Student Support Centre wing to The Bridge will pick up on whatever comes through the school's doors each morning. Upset, injury, clothing issues or disruption, a specialist team of teachers and support staff sets to work with the calm efficiency of a busy A&E. Problems are addressed. Parents are brought in. Tempers are soothed. Quiet love takes precedence over rigid protocols. *Nothing is allowed to get in the way of learning.*

And moving from emergency provision to longer term support, the second span of The Bridge, this most innovative of student support centres, is the Small Learning Community. It caters for vulnerable learners but is the antithesis of any exercise in isolation. It pours additional support on to individual needs and constantly seeks early re-integration. The exponential effect on lowering overall ability ranges and on heightening expectations has been dramatic. *Nothing is allowed to get in the way of learning.*

Throughout the rest of the school, teachers and other staff members also came up to us when we stopped to observe and explained what was going on, who was doing what, where the progress and achievements lay. We touched the textiles, heard of the myriad sponsorships, partnerships, leveraged funding opportunities and emerging plans and dreams. We revelled in the sense of joy at the phenomenal IT-resources, walked the length of the organic vegetable patch and nodded approvingly at the excitable student chefs and their challenging recipes. We experienced the fabric of joyful productivity.

Everything struck a wonderful poise between calmness and whole-hearted commitment – and all was utterly purposeful. There was an invisible spring of motivation and mutual support. There was an organisational culture that just about any commercial organisation in the world would envy and love to emulate. Across the school, *everything is about respect*: about the right to learn and the right to flourish.

There are things that as researchers and consultants we look for in every organisational culture we encounter – quite often, sadly, in vain. Here, however, we found ourselves easily capable of identifying both the higher values lived large and also the discipline and dedication to the cumulative micro-actions that is the only route to allowing them to work wonders.

The Cultureship Practice has developed its own framework of organisational culture success based on our privileged position of having been able to observe the beliefs and practices of hundreds of organisations.

We believe that great corporate culture relies on the fostering of Community Contribution & Recognition (CCR). In essence, CCR recognises that people need to feel part of a productive social grouping, they must be allowed to play an active role in the creation and sustaining of that community, and they have to be rewarded in multiple ways for that contribution.

This was the first time we had met Jack Pendlebury. And he gave us an object lesson in the creation of great corporate culture. Some places just get it right – the rest of us just look to model the magic of the intuitively excellent.

Below the top level umbrella value of Respect come three inviolable principles. These are: the right curriculum for each of the 700 students; the best teaching; the highest level of learning support. Jack calls these the school's "Trinity".

As mentioned, the key is that these are not abstracted and vacuous objectives stuck on corridor walls (the corridor walls are much, much too busy and packed with fantastic school work to leave significant room for corporate platitudes). Each objective is daily rolled forward through a myriad of actions, with fresh actions growing out of plans and fresh plans forming out of longer term dreams. The power of the culture is recursive, self-reinforcing, relentlessly growing and utterly infectious.

The actions segment into the creation of multiple opportunities for maximum involvement, astonishing attention to the detail of individual abilities and needs, and the constant feedback of good news (and not so good) to everyone involved. *These actions make for a highly convincing way of enacting Community Contribution & Recognition.*

Core curriculum results at Rose Bridge have soared. Exam results of 5+ A*-C results have now hit 73%, over a seven times improvement since Jack took the reins. But everywhere you look there are additional areas for involvement, for the creation of meaningful community. Absenteeism is very, very low.

From commercial sales of the organic garden produce, through a busy industrial unit supporting vocational training and out through a growing health drop-in centre, the school daily takes giant strides in walking the walk of being a true community school.

It exemplifies the way in which many successful 21st Century organisations open doors in order to build community in many directions. There is relentless building of friendships, alliances and partnerships.

There have been less easy times, too. As we discover time and again in our work with many kinds of organisations, it is often the letting go of the past that is in fact harder than embracing the future. And that often entails the painful and traumatic process of letting go of the people who are most reluctant to move forwards, unwilling to contribute. It is what management writer Jim Collins so vividly describes as “Getting the right people on the bus – and the wrong people off the bus.”

Jack Pendlebury has written elegantly of his own traumatic seat-shuffling times. Alongside the opening up of new ways, “simultaneous action was also focused on releasing as many of the ‘negative energy consumers’ from their discomfort at being contracted to a place with impossible goals and a vibrant attitude to the future.”

These days, amongst all the staff, there is a rolling programme of rich decision-making involvement and sharing of information. Teachers are under continuous assessment – but from the viewpoint of development, not assumed deficit.

The next step on this process is the forthcoming implementation of “mini-Ofsted” on a department-by-department basis. And not least, the youngsters’ views on the quality of their teaching are both frequently sought and highly influential. They are also encouraged to deliver objective views, more broadly on possibilities for improvements and more specifically on any ways in which peer behaviour may create barriers to learning and enjoyment.

Within all of this deep measurement, an empirical basis for the encouragement of maximum contribution, all students are themselves monitored and assessed on an eight week cycle. Individual action plans are drawn up where necessary.

The school’s most recent Ofsted report factors in greater degrees of local socio-demographic factors than were previously admitted and does not just slice away against finite averages. That said, the value-add that Rose Bridge achieves, 1031% is the score, is exceptional in any event. “Value-add” is a dry term – it means bringing light and opportunities to young lives.

The school employs a Futures Curriculum Director to mould an education stream that fits with the students. It rejects the shoehorning of students into a restricted range of educational moulds.

Additional possibilities for community and contribution are in fact relentlessly explored. Next on the agenda is the introduction of Vertical Tutoring, a re-badging of a house system, whereby senior students take pastoral responsibility for juniors. The youngest entrust their care to a senior authority – the elders must act up to that responsibility.

These are strong values, tribal values if you like. They are about mutuality and reciprocity. They extend entitlement but just as clearly demand responsibility. They afford the school astonishing balance and purpose.

Rose Bridge is a school which does the conventional things very well and unconventional things brilliantly. There is an absolute commitment to fun and “enjoyability” within each student’s education – and the management makes the achievement of this a serious business.

As we make to leave, we get a final lightening tour of the latest plans – the entrance to the school becoming a community internet café, the proposed creation of a hairdressers – both of the new ventures run by the students.

Everything is about blurring the distinction between school and community, pushing inclusion, possibilities and opportunities far into both directions.

We depart, deeply moved, down the brightly decorated and spotless corridors. Respect.