

Coastal Academies

Meeting the challenge of school improvement

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Dr Tanya Ovenden-Hope
Dr Rowena Passy

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Coastal Academies: meeting the challenge of school improvement

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Chapter 1: Policy context

Academies are independent, non-selective, state-funded schools that fall outside the control of local authorities, and that are managed by teams of independent co-sponsors (Machin and Vernoit, 2010). The programme has been controversial, with supporters believing that academies' ability to facilitate improvement rests on two particular features; the first is their independence from local authorities, which allows the governing body to pursue innovative school policies and curricula, and the second lies in the experience of the academy sponsors and their ability to offer appropriate resources and support (Machin and Vernoit, 2011, p.3). Opponents, however, object to the programme, believing that it is a form of back-door privatisation that will lead to greater social segregation (Machin and Vernoit, 2011).

Academies started replacing poorly-performing state schools following the Education Act of 2002. They were based on the belief that education in deprived areas would be improved through independent state-funded schools that exemplified the 'third way' commitment to combining private and public-sector ways of working. Academies were intended to bring the private-sector characteristics of independent sponsorship and freedom to innovate together with the public-sector goals of tackling educational inequalities and contributing to the regeneration of communities; the idea was to encourage a type of entrepreneurial leadership that reflected the risk-taking and innovation that was more usually associated with private sector business (Woods et al, 2007:238). The key aim of academies, however, was to:

... challenge the culture of educational under-attainment and produce improvements in standards, and play a key part in the regeneration of communities – helping to break the cycle of underachievement in areas of social economic deprivation, with academies ... sharing their expertise and facilities with other schools and the wider community (Woods et al, 2007: 239).

The implementation of the academy programme shifted during the Labour administration (Gunter, 2011a) and has been extended since the election of the Coalition government in 2010; the Academies Act of 2010 underpins the current aim to increase the overall number of academies substantially, and to include primaries, special schools and pupil referral units in the programme. The frequent changes in policy make evaluation of academies' performance a complex matter, and different evaluations (e.g. DfE, 2012; Machin and Wilson, 2009; Machin and Vernoit, 2011; National Audit Office, 2010; PwC, 2008) highlight the difficulties of assessing the impact of a policy that is continuously developing and changing. These large-scale evaluations have emphasised quantitative data, however, focusing to a large extent on the effect that the conversion to academy status has had on academic standards as measured by external examination results. Although there has also been qualitative work on academies (see, for instance, Gunter, 2011b), there has been little academic research specifically into coastal academies. These have a particular range of challenges similar to those in multicultural inner city schools that include high levels of socio-

economic deprivation, high levels of unemployment, limited parental involvement in their children's education and low aspirations. This project aims to contribute towards filling this particular research gap.

Chapter 2: The research project

This project is a qualitative investigation that aims to investigate how three coastal academies have approached the task of changing schools' culture of under-performance. It builds on a longitudinal study¹ currently being undertaken in one coastal academy, in which the first cohort of Year 7 students' progress through their secondary education will be followed up until the age of 18. The aim of this founding project is to monitor and evaluate changes in the academy as reflected through the performance, achievements and views of the class of 2010 represented by a sample of 15 students. These data will be complemented and enhanced by interviews with senior leaders and teaching staff of the class of 2010, and by monitoring the academic progress of these students. The whole should, when taken in the context of the academy's academic performance, enable a detailed insight into the establishment, journey and potential successes of a new school system in an area of socio-economic deprivation that has a reputation of failing young people's education.

Funding was subsequently received to widen the research into a pilot project that aims to compare the strategies, processes and outcomes of *three* coastal academies. The objectives of this project are to:

- study each academy's publicly-available data to provide context for the research
- examine relevant documentation provided by each academy e.g. Academy Improvement Plan, Academy Organisational Structure.
- interview the principal (or delegated representative) and one other senior leader of each establishment to understand the context of the academy, the strategic priorities, challenges and successes
- interview a sample of four teachers. The purpose of these interviews is to gain a range of different views on the impact of the measures undertaken thus far.

The data collection was completed in September 2012, and has now been analysed to examine commonalities and differences in leadership approach, together with perceived changes and developments in school culture. In the next section we give a brief description of the three academies. Chapter 4 outlines the strategies taken in each academy in relation to teaching and learning, developing a team and students. In Chapter 5 we bring the report to a conclusion, drawing together the leadership features that appeared to be most important in effecting change in these participating academies.

¹ Class of 2010 – an investigation of the transition of a school with national challenge status into an Academy, evaluating the impact of the change on the students, staff and school between the years 2010 – 2017. The Class of 2010 study will continue alongside any further comparative investigations.

Chapter 3: The project academies

As academies situated in coastal regions, the three participating institutions share a number of common characteristics. These relate principally to the academies' location in wards with high levels of poverty and deprivation, compounded in each case by a local authority that has a selective education system (although two were affected more directly than the third), and limited employment prospects for local school leavers. In all cases the former schools had the lowest examination results in the locality, were either designated as 'national challenge' or were in special measures, and suffered from a poor reputation in a community that seemingly placed little value on education.

In addition each of the schools had – and continues to have – its own local challenges. **Clacton Coastal Academy** had the complex situation of amalgamating two failing (but very different) schools into one academy, with strong local rivalries between the schools and vociferous opposition from a number of parents. The Executive Principal took a phased approach to amalgamation, smoothing the process as far as possible by giving local people time to adjust to the changes and to change their perception of students who attended the 'other' school. A current, significant challenge is that several of the main primary feeder schools are in categories, with the result that many pupils arrive with literacy and numeracy difficulties together with behaviour-related issues. These challenges are compounded by high turbulence in the local pupil population. This academy is part of a multi-academy trust that is sponsored by a charitable education trust. The sponsors do not sit on the Clacton Coastal Academy governing body, which is populated entirely by non-educationalists. The sponsoring trust has established the mission statement for the Academy, a mission common to its growing number of schools within the sponsored multi-academy trust:

Our federation of Academies will embrace new technologies in world class learning facilities, building on the best practice and experiences that each of the predecessor schools has developed over a number of years. By sharing common standard operating procedures, frameworks and policies, we will be developing Academies that can lead an education evolution rather than performing status. (Clacton Coastal Academy, 2012)

Of the three participating academies, it has the largest number of pupils, the highest percentage of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and the second highest percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM).

The Marsh Academy is situated in an isolated area and has a low-ability intake. The academy educates a relatively high proportion of looked-after children, many of whom are far from their place of origin because they have been allocated foster homes in the area as part of a business-focussed national management strategy. Current issues continue to be the level of prior attainment of learners, difficulties with staff recruitment and poor or negative parental engagement, often because of a poor experience in the predecessor school. This

academy is not part of a multi-academy trust; its sponsors, who have representation as members of the governing body, include a global IT company, a local independent school, a state-maintained secondary school and the local authority (LA). The academy aims to utilise the expertise of the sponsors to support individualised learning to enable students to achieve to their best ability and engage with business and enterprise for future employability:

Our aim at the The Marsh Academy is to encourage students to raise their aspirations and achieve their potential in all that they do, from academic subjects and vocational learning to sports and the arts. We aim to deliver options and teaching that fire the imagination and give students the opportunity to develop their individual strengths.

Students at the Academy thrive on our broad, varied and personalised curriculum (The Marsh Academy, 2012)

It is the smallest of our participating academies, has the lowest percentage of pupils with SEN and the lowest percentage of pupils eligible for FSM.

Marine Academy Plymouth, as Clacton Coastal Academy, established at the time of conversion that students were pastorally well-cared for but that there was little challenge or expectation of academic or broader success. Current issues for the academy include the relatively low levels of student prior attainment, local demographic changes which are resulting in a smaller number of potential students, and increased strain on local families triggered by the current economic austerity, which manifests itself in a range of social issues when students are at school. This academy is not part of a multi-academy trust; its sponsors, all of whom are represented on the governing body, are a local higher education institution (HEI), a local further education college and the LA. The vision for Marine Academy Plymouth is educational regeneration for the area, using the educational knowledge and experience of the sponsors as governors and a focus on the assets of the coastal region:

Our vision is clear. Marine Academy Plymouth will dramatically transform educational provision for northwest [city name]. Additionally it will enhance the whole city's current educational offer. We are determined to develop a world-class education facility, which will raise standards of educational achievement and widen participation levels in the city, through using the Environment and Marine Environment as curriculum offerings, a motivator and a vehicle for economic transformation (Magpie Academy, 2012)

Marine Academy Plymouth lies in the middle of the three participating academies in terms of the number of pupils on roll and percentage of pupils with SEN, but has the highest percentage of pupils eligible for FSM.

Chapter 4: Meeting the challenge of school improvement

4.1 Introduction

This section reports on the way in which the challenge of school improvement was approached in each of the project academies.

All three academies appointed new a Principal or Executive Principal upon conversion, and these reported the same priorities; raising student levels of attainment, improving behaviour and encouraging students to have ambition for their future. All senior interviewees expressed a deep morality in this endeavour that was centred on equity and social justice:

I think there is a very basic priority which underpins everything and that is that we have to improve the life chances of every child with whom we come in contact. And I'm a huge believer in education unlocking life chances (Marine Academy Plymouth senior leader).

Equally, there was a rather more pragmatic recognition of the political necessity of raising standards:

The DfE measure is when you start in September, by September [the following year], results need to have risen. You know, never mind all the other issues, priority one is to raise standards (laughs). That is what academies are about (Clacton Coastal Academy senior leader).

We are improving rapidly, but not rapidly enough! Ofsted judgements are an issue. (The Marsh Academy senior leader)

The different contexts of the three schools when converting to academy status, together with the style and personality of each Principal / Executive Principal, meant that each has responded in a different way to the specific challenges of a coastal academy. In the following sections, we describe the particular issues faced by each academy and the leadership's approach to developing a new culture of high aspiration, expectation and performance.

4.2 Clacton Coastal Academy

4.2.1. Early issues

In Clacton Coastal Academy the task was to bring the two schools together into a coherent structure while simultaneously restructuring the leadership into a team that could drive change at the pace the Executive Principal, the academy chain sponsors and the Department for Education (DfE) required. Interviewees reported that neither of the previous schools had strong leadership, and that the new leadership provided a 'vision' that was 'very

positive, very highly-driven; the targets set are extremely high (teacher). On the one hand, staff were 'scared' by the prospect of change because there was *'a lot more pressure on teachers... to come up to the mark'* (senior leader) but, on the other, there was a sense of relief that all staff were going to have to pull their weight and make a contribution to improving the performance of the school:

One of the things that people said when we got the academy status and we found out we were getting a new head was 'Well, now maybe that'll be sorted out, now maybe they won't get away with it ... the staff ethos about the weakest link actually being allowed to continue being the weakest link. 'I do my job; they don't do theirs, they get away with it' ... Now everybody has a common aim and they know exactly what is required of them - accountability (senior leader).

4.2.2 Teaching and learning

An early emphasis was on improving the quality of teaching and learning, with support from *'lots of intervention from the sponsors'* (senior leader). New tracking data systems were put in place; all teachers were observed, RAG-rated and then given monitoring and support plans where necessary, with sponsor consultants coming in regularly to the academy and teaching alongside staff in the classroom. The sponsors put in place an annual inspection that was reported as being *'a friendly Ofsted'* in which they *'give some good advice'* (teacher). Sponsor literacy and numeracy specialists were reported as being particularly helpful in their support of areas which, at the time, were weak; recruitment of both maths and English teachers had been difficult with the result that there had been an over-reliance on supply teachers. The issue with recruiting appropriate maths staff continues, and there have been regular changes in maths leadership since conversion.

The academy has built in a system whereby senior staff observe lessons without formal notification, and teachers are given targets for students' levels of progress; the pressure to achieve these has *'intensified in the last year or so'* (teacher) as the need for higher external examination scores has increased. CPD support is on-going, with designated staff that link with and attend the sponsors' professional development; selected staff within the academy then deliver the CPD to others, with the intention that it reaches all staff. Staff who wish to develop in middle and senior leadership roles can take advantage of the training offered by the sponsors, which takes the form of visiting and working in other academies within the chain.

All interviewees commented on how expectations of staff were raised in line with the levels of support for those who were willing to change. This was described as a *'quite ruthless'* process (senior leader) whereby if staff were not improving the quality of their teaching quickly enough they were given extra support, with the full backing of the Executive Principal, or offered the option of leaving:

I won't tolerate underperformance. I won't tolerate poor standards but I will look after the staff ... they all have significant opportunities if they want to develop (Executive Principal).

4.2.3 Developing a team

The academy's grow-your-own approach to school leadership and management was brought about by the Executive Principal's approach of spotting, supporting and nurturing staff talent, which had the aim of creating a '*coherent leadership team who would work at the pace I wanted them to work*'. A flexible leadership team structure was introduced to accommodate talented staff, and this was combined with the opportunities for staff development offered within the academy chain. Other considerations included the difficulties with local recruitment and retention that were seen to lie with first, more stringent government requirements for already-pressured teachers and senior leaders, and secondly, an isolated locality in which there were few prospects for the ambitious. Promotion has been given to a number of relatively young teachers who then are given support within the academy and through the sponsors; our interviewees all commented that there was support for their own development into managers and leaders if they wished to develop in that area.

To support staff members, new facilities such as a crèche for staff children, a discount for school nursery provision and a room for nursing mothers have been introduced. These were reported as well-received by staff.

4.2.4 Students

Students who are working below standard have '*tons of interventions*' (senior leader) to accelerate their progress, but there are significant challenges:

We inherit attendance problems [from the primary schools], and literacy and numeracy problems from what are quite troubled families anyway. And then we have to try and sort them in Year 7 and accelerate their progress through the next five years to get the grades that they should. And that's not easy (senior leader).

However there are constraints on supporting students; the academy inherited a large deficit budget from the predecessor school and its reduction has involved compromises on measures that senior leadership had wanted to take. In addition the budget has reduced as the academy start-up grants have come to an end, with the result that '*it's getting tighter and tighter to actually put the kind of interventions into place [that we want]*' (senior leader).

Raising students' aspirations was reported as a particular issue. Part of this was due to the low levels of attainment on entering the academy, but is compounded by the limited employment prospects for students on leaving school; the local economy has a high reliance on care, hospitality and catering, with some limited opportunity in construction. In addition a

number of teachers have attended the school themselves, graduated from a local university and then joined the academy staff; as a senior leader commented:

it works [for the academy] but on the other hand what does it say about their [staff] aspirations and horizons? ... I worry about the information, advice and guidance that we give them [students] ... because what they see is people who were at the school, come back and work in the school.

There are a number of measures being taken to address this challenge, which was exemplified by one teacher's comment that *'if the opportunity is not available locally, we make our own!'*. These include a strong vocational offer within the academy; working with businesses to develop the community – a large technology firm has been persuaded to bring their regional training centre to a local campus, for instance; representatives from local universities and businesses visiting the academy regularly to raise awareness of possible post-16 routes; and students spending an increased amount of time on work experience and training to increase their understanding of employability. A particular highlight is a London West End theatre director, complete with professional orchestra and choreographer, running an annual musical at the academy. Nonetheless, the complexity of the different issues that impact on raising levels of attainment meant that achieving the required 50 per cent of students reaching an A*-C GCSE grade by 2015 was reported as *'going to be a struggle'* (senior leader).

An important signifier of change to the students was through a new, strictly-enforced uniform policy, which was aimed not only at improving students' self image but also the image of the academy among the local community: *'something so simple as wearing a smart uniform, suddenly people's perceptions changed'* (senior leader). The uniform policy was supplemented by a simpler and more consistently-applied behaviour policy that aimed to show students the importance of mutual respect between all individuals within the academy; as with staff, the emphasis is on treating students fairly with clear rewards for positive behaviour:

It's not about a constant stick. It's about lots of carrots, and it's making sure that that's the priority; that students feel valued, so they can see a point to it (senior leader).

These 'carrots' include the rewards that have been introduced for attendance; those students recording high levels of attendance are entered into a draw, with one prize per year group per term.

4.2.5 Comments

While we recognise that our sample of interviewees was small, staff were generally highly positive about the changes. Below is a selection of their comments:

- *It's getting to the root of it [problems within the school] ... [it's been a] massive culture change for staff as well as fed down to the students.*
- *It has been a challenge to adjust to the changes.*
- *There was definite support put in place but by the same token it was 'You play ball or you get out' (laughs).*
- *I think he's [Executive Principal] held very accountable ... The way the sponsors work ... actually every single bit of what is going on in that school, he is also held accountable.*
- *I like the idea that you should be looking over your shoulder ... I think good teachers will be able to cope with that, and certainly with the modern environment, I think we need to have good teachers ... I think under pressure you perform better.*
- *You're paid money, do your job! ... there's an absolute fairness in that.*
- *[CPD] is very good actually. I have to say that's one thing that's improved.*
- *I think more and more people have got on board with what we are doing.*
- *[Students] have a much better sense of identity with the academy now.*
- *There have been big leaps with behaviour ... big leaps with how pupils behave and interact with each other.*
- *I think when you're seeing all these good changes, then the kids are thinking 'Right, I need to change the way I behave, I need to change the way I'm dressing myself. I need to fit into this new environment' ... I think it's had a very positive effect overall, becoming an academy.*
- *There is definitely a more positive feel for them [students]; they know clearly what their direction is and they feel supported as they go.*

Comments indicating areas for consideration included:

- *There are little initiatives that come out which we're asked to get on board with And then somebody comes up with something else, and then it's something new again ... it might be down to the amount of management people; although that brings some really good things, I think sometimes potentially I can see it as a bit of a bun fight at times*
- *I think we have a lot of training on how to deal with certain things in class. Do we have a lot of individual support? Perhaps not*
- *It's hard to fit ... the extra training and support around all my lessons that I have to teach*
- *It's not nice having people taken out for extra English or for English exams or doing extra maths ... it makes our lives [as teachers of other subjects] difficult.*

4.2.6 Current strategic priorities

This academy initially made very rapid progress with pupil achievement levels, but then results '*flat-lined*' (senior leader) for a while before improving again. The strategic priorities are now to ensure that all students can access the curriculum as a foundation for their future years in the academy, and to secure curricula that meet all student needs while taking into account the government requirements relating to the English Baccalaureate; this is all part of

the aim to raise student aspirations. The emphasis for teaching and learning is now shifting towards intensifying support for students when they enter the school through a more primary-based curriculum, with fewer teachers and less movement between classes. The intention is that this nurturing environment will support and enable all students to access the curriculum effectively as they approach Years 8 and 9.

4.3 The Marsh Academy

4.3.1 Early issues

The Marsh Academy's predecessor school also suffered from the lowest levels of attainment in the area, and senior staff regarded – and continue to regard – the selective system of education in the local authority as the most challenging issue for the academy. The ethos of the former school was described as one of *'apathy and failure'* (senior leader) in which behaviour and attendance were poor and many staff were poorly qualified or were regarded as inadequate teachers. Senior leadership responded in this academy by opting for an holistic approach that focused on the quality of the student experience; they initiated an incremental, bottom-up approach in which substantial changes initiated in Year 7 gradually spread as each cohort of these students moved up through the school. This was complemented by other measures that were implemented throughout the whole academy, including the establishment of four mini-schools, each led by a member of the Senior Leadership Team, a Mini-School Leader (MSL) and a Student Development Leader (SDL) to promote positive performance among students and mentoring by SDLs.

The academy has recently completed a new building that is seen by the Executive Principal as a physical representation of the change of vision from the predecessor school, and it is hoped that the building will support a more positive attitude from the local community. The old school buildings were there for several decades and were seen as representing many parents' perceptions that the new The Marsh Academy was offering the same as the predecessor school. The 'new build' will be complete once the predecessor school classrooms, which are the only visible part of the school from the road, are completed to allow The Marsh Academy to be seen by the community.

4.3.2 Teaching and learning

Senior leadership's approach was to make improving standards of teaching and learning their central focus. Higher expectations of attainment, developing an accessible curriculum, improving behaviour and raising the quality of teaching, in part by restructuring teaching and learning in Years 7 and 8, were seen as the way in which to ensure that each successive new cohort could engage with the new academy direction. Primary senior staff were recruited to develop and support a new problem-based learning (PBL) department, in which these early cohorts are taught for 14 hours a week through cross-curricular projects that incorporate English, maths, science, IT and humanities. The principle is to have as few teachers as possible, so that this department operates in a similar way to a primary school, thereby softening the transition to secondary education and allowing stronger relationships to develop between staff and pupils. Although this puts pressure on these staff to ensure

that students are ready to learn effectively in Year 9, the system is regarded as highly positive:

I think that because we see them [pupils] as much as we do and we can teach cross-curricular, actually that takes some of the pressure off. Because they are more ready to learn I think, when they are in that comfort zone of being in a PBL group (teacher).

The rationale behind the cross-curricular learning is that it can support different learning styles and encourages the development of a number of different skills such as team work, independent work and problem-solving. A clear top set and a golden curriculum have been set up to offer provision for high and lower-ability students, with a wide band in the middle that is closer to a series of mixed-ability sets.

The academy has also introduced the idea of the 'six Rs' – resourcefulness, resilience, responsibility, respect, reflection and reasoning – with the aim of making them *'the substance behind what they [pupils] do'* (teacher). The emphasis again is on introducing each Year 7 to the principles of the 'six Rs', so that they become increasingly embedded within the pupils' approach to learning and to school practice; although the older students are aware of them, they are not *'ingrained'* (teacher) in these students' learning as they are with the younger cohorts.

As part of bringing coherence to the teaching across the academy, teachers are required to make the learning objectives explicit and to share them with the students, who then record them. A drive on assessment for learning (AfL) strategies, ensuring that teachers have good subject knowledge and a creative approach to teaching and in which staff are encouraged to use a variety of approaches and a range of different media, has been aimed at bringing a combination of structure and innovation to teaching. Formal and informal observations have meant that teachers *'have less opportunity to hide; everything is out in the open'* (teacher), while PBL offers teachers regular opportunities to team teach. These links between teachers are encouraged by the design of the new academy building, which is open plan, with a number of classrooms off the central unit.

The academy has established an explicit link for student curriculum CPD with both the independent school sponsor and the state school sponsor. The Executive Principal has extended the curriculum for students by providing opportunities for learning at both of the sponsors' schools, either as full subjects (A Level) or enhancement sessions. Staff also have the opportunity to participate in CPD with colleagues from each of the sponsors' schools.

In the first year of academy status each student was given a laptop by the IT company sponsoring the school, but this source of support has now ceased and the academy purchases its own laptops. Student access to laptops/IT is considered to be an essential

element to achieve not only the business and enterprise aims of The Marsh Academy, but to support inclusive access to IT for students.

4.3.3 Developing a team

Changes to senior leadership included appointing a new Executive Principal to work with the Head Teacher in establishing the new academy. This senior leadership approach was welcomed, particularly given the location of the school and level of improvement required.

If you were leading a rural school in isolation, doing this on your own, you couldn't do it. The saving grace is having the executive principal and I working together (senior leader).

The Marsh Academy also employed a number of experienced primary staff to teach in the PBL department. More generally however there has been little leadership and management restructuring; the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff is an on-going issue for the academy. Senior leadership in this instance has taken a pragmatic approach to change, regarding it as a long-term process with new staff recruited as older ones – who have often been at the school for around 30 years – retire.

The focus has rather been on creating an environment for teaching and learning which is open, participative and inclusive, facilitated by the new building that allows movement between and within classes. Teaching is seen as team-based experience, with lessons taking place in large learning spaces for whole year groups and led by the teacher expert in the lesson objective and facilitated by the other teachers in the team. Teamwork is encouraged and consolidated through this approach to teaching, enabling less experienced teachers to use the lessons to develop and hone their own knowledge and practice and students to work productively within a community of learners, not just a class. There is a clear emphasis on inclusivity and working together for staff and students.

4.3.4 Students

This academy has not used the uniform policy, which was described as *'quite strict, but we don't exclude anybody for not having their tie done up and stuff'* (senior leader), as a marker of change. This is partly because it can be seen to open up an area of unnecessary conflict; staff felt that other issues should be of a higher priority.

Interviewees reported that it was important in the first instance to focus on student behaviour and attendance in order to improve the standard of teaching and learning:

Behaviour was the first thing, trying to make people actually come to school and behave in school ... trying to make students feel there's a point to being here, there's a point to learning because it will get them somewhere (teacher).

Although students were initially slow to respond to the behaviour strategies, which was rationalised as ‘*same buildings, same staff, very little had changed except for the name*’ (senior leader), but now ‘*attendance is now good and behaviour is rapidly improving*’ (teacher). As in Clacton Coastal Academy, the emphasis has been on positive encouragement as well as sanctions:

There have been some sanctions that have been brought in to tackle behaviour ... there's a really big drive on rewards, tackling students positively to discourage it in the first place. That's had a big impact. We do rewards concerts and things like that, so students who don't have behaviour points on our system...get invited to awards concerts. And that's been a really positive thing to try and encourage people not to misbehave (teacher).

In addition all teachers offer an after-school club, which is regarded as an effective way of developing relationships within and between staff and pupils.

4.3.5 Comments

A selection of positive comments from staff at The Marsh Academy included:

- *Ninety per cent of staff now see it [academy] as their school – cleaners, cooks, teachers. It is the seed of change in the last 18 months for behaviour and attendance.*
- *I think [the Executive Principal's] vision and strategy are second to none*
- *I was saying to a student the other day, I can't remember what he was doing, he was refusing to do something, 'People don't do that any more here! Look around, and nobody does that any more' ... and it was like 'Yeah, you're right'. So the change has been huge.*
- *I knew the building would make a difference. People kept telling me. But actually it has made a bigger difference that I believed it really would ... the students were awed; you could see it on their face. The behaviour around has been much better since we came into this building*
- *[When I joined] it was alarming to see their [pupils'] apathy towards assessments and their grades ... I was horrified, I couldn't believe it. But if you fast forward to now, they are all battling to get the best scores ... It is just a completely different feel, and the pupils are different.*
- *The lessons are far more engaging, far more focused; it is not just turn up and teach*
- *We are setting a really strong foundation [with PBL], not just in ability but also in skills, so pupils have the independent skills to go on to GCSE that year earlier*
- *As you go through the school you can see those pupils who have been in problem-based learning and have that foundation.*
- *There's a real rigour within the actual staff set. Attitudes I think are a massive positive and also the results. Our results are climbing.*

Comments indicating areas for consideration included:

- *It has traditionally been a school where teachers have hung on for quite a long time and not necessarily moved; they've got a little bit set in their ways*
- *Living within the community, the biggest challenge has been changing public perception. The school lives on its reputation for a long time whether that's positive or negative ... we are working on that*
- *[We are linked to an independent school] but I don't ever see any evidence of that personally. We get students that might come over, and we might get a couple of staff that go one way or another but there's no [sense of joint staff development] ... that doesn't mean there isn't anything else strategically going on.*
- *[What matters] is getting all the staff to buy into them [the changes] and consistently buy into them, and that is quite a big job, particularly ... in this school where there hasn't been much turnover. Because obviously you can make new staff buy into the new way quite easily; it is harder with the older staff.*

4.3.6 Current strategic priorities

The Marsh Academy has recorded year-on-year increases in pupil attainment, and results in English and maths are now above the national averages. The current challenges are to improve results 'across the board' (teacher), raising the percentage of pupils passing five good GCSEs, to improve behaviour further and to raise student aspirations. Although there was some perception among staff that the academy's reputation was changing, it was felt there was some way to go and that it was important to make the local community aware of the progress the academy is making. In line with this, there was an ambition expressed to make the academy the first choice for more pupils rather than a default for those not passing the 11+; 'we will have succeeded when they [pupils] come here by automatic choice' (teacher). However, as in Clacton Coastal Academy, it was also felt that there was little recognition of the progress that had been made:

I think that's the issue that is coming through with all the academies at the moment, that the value added that the academies are bringing to what were these nationally challenged schools has been exceptional, but they're not necessarily meeting the national average. And that is the problem; it's [the task is] making the government and the public and the locals really aware that it [the academy] is making great strides forward (teacher).

4.4 Marine Academy Plymouth

4.4.1 Early issues

The predecessor school of Marine Academy Plymouth was a national challenge school that converted to academy status when its reputation was poor; effectively at the bottom in the local hierarchy of schools, its staff were demoralised from the demands arising from the national challenge status that were not having a noticeable effect on school performance. As with Clacton Coastal Academy's predecessor schools, there was a caring ethos, but one of low expectation; as with The Marsh Academy's predecessor school, a large percentage of

staff had been employed at the school for a long time and were accustomed to thinking of the school as providing education for low-ability students.

The approach taken by senior leadership was that the transformation to a high-achieving academy was a long-term plan:

This [first year as an Academy] has been like Year Zero because we've had to find out a lot about the context of the school and the students. A lot of areas have lacked process and procedure, so we've introduced a lot of that. But it really needs embedding before it will actually have an effect, so a lot of it's been about embedding the process, [and] not necessarily expecting huge outcomes of it yet (senior leader).

4.4.2 Teaching and learning

Senior leadership in Marine Academy Plymouth took a long-term view of raising levels of student attainment and overall school performance, believing that any significant impact on school performance would be through changing the students' and staff expectations immediately upon conversion. The vision of senior leadership was to *'develop the highest level of education ... which will allow the greatest number of children to enjoy those experiences and move forward in life'* (senior leader). As with The Marsh Academy, the main aim of academy policy was to *'raise the bar'* of student attainment gradually over each cycle of intake; to achieve a *'measured'* change in the culture of the school to one in which there were high expectations of student success. The intention has been to establish teaching approaches that are sustainable in the long-term and that have the effect of *'switching students onto the subject'* (senior leader) so that they engage with the content of the curriculum.

To that end a new curriculum has been initiated that is intended to *'offer relevance, offer engagement, offer excitement and offer a much greater likelihood of success'* (senior leader). This includes offering greater opportunities for learning outside the classroom, either in relation to outdoor sport, such as taking students to an outdoor activity centre, or as part of the curriculum. Practical experience of the marine has been introduced through qualifications and courses that include water sports and sailing, and there are plans to develop a marine engineering course and a Marine Studies GCSE. Input from a local university and connections with a local aquarium mean that different resources and expertise can be utilised by Marine Academy Plymouth to widen and deepen students' learning in these areas.

An holistic approach to Assessment for Learning (AfL) has been adopted with the intention of helping students to develop their learning skills and staff to evaluate the extent to which students were becoming effective and independent learners. Peer assessment is considered to be an important part of AfL, because it enables students to see others' work (and therefore that all students have successes and challenges in the course of their academic

school life) and because students tended to respect their peers' opinions, which staff reported as an important aspect of learner motivation.

Strong performance management has been introduced with regular observations and target-setting, and support plans are set up for staff in the areas of the curriculum that are under-performing. Weekly drop-in observations and regular scrutiny of student work are part of the strategy for improvement, and external consultants can be brought in to support this process. Staff are encouraged sign up for a masters' level course at the sponsor university, to engage in their own action research and to reflect on their teaching:

I think the most important thing is [to encourage] the type of staff who are reflective about their practice ... and they're on a learning journey themselves. And they're never comfortable with the status quo ... they're always walking out of the lesson no matter how well it went, thinking I'll do it this way next time (senior leader).

4.4.3. Developing a team

Immediate changes to senior leadership included appointing a new Principal, Senior Vice-Principal and establishing a new senior leadership team to embed the ethos of the new school. The next phase was to reorganise the teaching structure so that it was more streamlined and with a clear place for pastoral support. To support these changes non-timetabled time of Friday afternoons offered all staff regular communication through structured meetings, as well as CPD. School staff have generally supported this restructuring, and interviewees reported feeling involved in decision-making and as part of the academy community change:

I think staff are all working forwards together, which is vital (teacher).

The focus has been on creating an environment for teaching and learning which is inclusive and supportive, enabling staff to develop professionally in a way that supports their own teaching and learning and makes them feel part of the new academy:

What the Principal has tried to do is not pigeon-hole people, not put people down one pathway. It is putting people in roles where they can develop rather than saying, 'Right, you're going down the old-style head of department route' (teacher).

As with Clacton Coastal Academy, the emphasis has been on a 'grow your own approach' to staff development and promotion:

Just the amount of staff I've seen growing ... in terms of their contribution and their roles ... some of them are now growing themselves into excellent senior leaders and are potentially very good (senior leader).

A marine theme has been introduced into the academy; the intention is to establish a difference from other schools regionally and nationally, and to include staff and students in this difference in a way that supports a team ethos for the school.

4.4.4 Students

Marine Academy Plymouth introduced a new uniform policy that required all students to wear a blazer, tie and black shoes. As was the case in Clacton Coastal Academy, the teachers interviewed felt that this was a positive move as it signalled a break with the past; they believed it had started to promote an ethos of excellence through helping students to develop pride in the institution. Although staff commented on the student response being divided about the new uniform, one teacher reported that the uniform had helped students to develop ‘*a sense of pride about themselves*’. Another teacher suggested that the uniform has helped foster students’ self-esteem and self-belief, and that they now ‘*look like learners*’.

4.4.5 Comments

A selection of positive comments from staff at Marine Academy Plymouth included:

- *It was apparent immediately that there was a whole new way of learning, a way of thinking, and I think the students bought into that straight away.*
- *My big focus...is about improving the teaching and learning, because ultimately it's the quality of the teaching and learning for the students that matters more than anything.*
- *I think there's a lot more personalised learning now. I think there's a lot more of giving students opportunities to develop themselves in more ways than just achieving exam results.*
- *I think it's just giving students that practical experience to go with the theoretical work that you're trying to give them. It's about enthusing the students ... and having these opportunities [for trips to learn outside the classroom] certainly does that.*
- *I think the main starting point with that was the uniform; I think that has made a massive difference.*
- *I think the main thing has been the demand, really, of consistency, ensuring that everyone's working to the same group of focuses, the same group of aims, the same ethos.*
- *My professional development has gone through the roof. [The academy] has been good to me.*
- *We've got the Friday afternoons when students finish at 12.30pm; that's been invaluable because ... [it] has given us the opportunity for Inset, for different developments, for these meetings.*
- *I think we needed the changes and I think the changes have been very positive.*
- *I've grown in a management capacity a lot more; I think a lot of the experiences I've had have been recognised by the head and have enabled me to do the job.*

- *I do think it [morale] is getting better. Even the older colleagues have come across and said they actually feel more relaxed when the head teacher is doing their briefing on Friday afternoon.*

Comments indicating areas for consideration included:

- *I think there have been some challenges with the double session [100 minute lessons]. For some students it's too much, and that's all about your ability to lead ... it's also a slight issue in terms of the late finish, especially during the winter months*
- *I do think there is always going to be animosity to change; there are always going to be supporters of the old regime*
- *It's always going to be difficult as we deal with such a low intake in terms of ability of out students*
- *I think staff morale fluctuates throughout the year ... they're very tired at the moment; they're dealing with a lot of changes.*

4.4.6 Current strategic priorities

Marine Academy Plymouth converted to academy status relatively recently, and has recorded increases in pupil attainment in each year since conversion. The current challenges are to continue to improve results, raising the percentage of pupils passing five good GCSEs, to improve behaviour and to raise student aspirations. In order to help with this, closer links are planned with feeder primaries to make the transition to secondary school smoother. Parental engagement continues to be a problem, and the academy is working to improve this. Although there was some perception among staff that the academy's reputation was changing, it was felt there was some way to go and that it was important to continue to work with the local community and make them aware of its progress.

4.5 Summary of key points

All three schools faced issues that included:

- poor local reputation
- low levels of student prior attainment
- poor student behaviour
- the need to raise staff and student aspirations
- the quality of teaching and learning
- difficulties in recruiting high-quality staff
- budgetary constraints.

These different factors all translated into poor student performance, which was the central focus for change.

The approach in **Clacton Coastal Academy** was to provide strong leadership to the highly complex process of amalgamating two rival and underperforming schools into one new

academy. This required a fundamental restructuring of the schools' organisation. Key points relating to these changes include:

- School leadership presented an uncompromising attitude, but staff reported that they understood the drivers for change in the school and commented that '*something needed to happen*'. They also reported that the lines of accountability were clearly set out, and appreciated the '*absolute fairness*' in the clarity of expectation.
- In the early days of the conversion to academy status Clacton Coastal Academy clearly had strong support from the sponsors, who sent in advisers/consultants on a regular basis and identified ways forward for school improvement. Staff continue to have regular opportunities for professional and leadership development through the sponsor chain, and there are regular sponsor inspections that were likened to a '*friendly Ofsted*'.
- The pace of change required to impact quickly on learner outcomes was manifest to staff, students and community through the style of leadership adopted by the Executive Principal and through the visual marker of a strict uniform code.
- Staff reported being under increasing pressure to raise student performance.
- The academy initially made rapid progress with student achievement levels; results then '*flat-lined*' before improving once again.

The Marsh Academy adopted a more pragmatic and compromising approach to change, implementing a long term approach. Key points include:

- The strategy to implement change from the bottom up by restructuring learning in Year 7 and Year 8 to a cross-curricular, problem-based learning approach.
- New staff were recruited for these year groups, some from primary schools, to ease the transition from primary and encourage students to engage with their learning so that they could cope with the extra demands in Year 9.
- Initial support from the IT sponsor meant that the academy had access to laptops for each student. This support has now ceased. Teacher CPD is offered on an on-going basis from the sponsor schools, although not all staff are aware of these opportunities
- Staff turnover was relatively small, with teachers expected to retire rather than leave. This was reported as a limiting factor on effecting change.
- The academy has reported year-on-year increases in pupil attainment.

Marine Academy Plymouth demonstrated a radical and fast-track strategy for change. Key points include:

- The school leadership structure was refocused, including the appointment of a new Principal by the sponsors. The restructuring signified change to staff and came with a clear message of the required improvement, together with high levels of staff support.
- Sponsors, which include a local HEI and a college of further education, have provided consistent support in developing the new curriculum and in offering CPD to staff.

- Staff finish teaching at 12.30 on Friday, offering time for meetings and to undertake CPD.
- Staff reported challenges with the new structure of 100 minute lessons, and that an environment of constant change can cause their morale to fluctuate.
- The academy has reported increases in pupil attainment each year since conversion.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this research was to develop an understanding of how the three academies, located in similar coastal regions in England and that have high levels of socio-economic deprivation, are approaching the task of changing school culture from one of *'apathy and failure'* towards one of high expectation, aspiration and achievement.

Glover and Coleman (2005) suggest that school culture can be defined as:

... the integration of environmental, organisational and experiential features of social existence to offer a context for teaching and learning and its subsequent improvement (Glover and Coleman, 2005, p.266).

They argue that a school culture has measurable components², but that each of these measures has a subjective basis as they are rooted in different people's opinions of developments within the school. This type of data gives a flavour of culture in action, but needs to be set in the wider context of the national framework for education, the local socio-economic and political contexts, and the particular makeup of communities in and around the school. It is these combinations of factors that makes each school culture unique, and makes any culture change a notoriously difficult process that takes time and active commitment from leaders if it is to succeed (Collarbone, 2011).

The grounding of academies in independent regulation elicits the need for a new type of leadership; one that embraces autonomy and self-direction in both governance and expectations of staff engagement. For schools converting from 'national challenge' circumstances, this journey to independence impacts further on academy culture, as it necessitates a whole staff shift in perception and acceptance of high aspiration. Lack of recognised school, and thereby professional, success can undermine confidence in the staff and community of the schools' ability to improve. Any move to increase responsibility and accountability for school staff can therefore be hard to implement, requiring leadership that recognises and supports all staff through the transition to school improvement.

² For instance student attitudes and behaviours can be measured by number of reported incidents or exclusions.

The evidence in this report suggests that the leadership in each academy is sensitive to their particular national and local contexts; each school leader provided a clear rationale for change that was rooted in the situation in which they found themselves but that was framed by national requirements. While we acknowledge that our interview sample is small, the evidence also suggests that staff in all three academies believed that the culture has changed noticeably towards one of greater teacher commitment to high-quality learning and of stronger student engagement with learning. This was seen by all leader interviewees as the key to turning each academy's fortunes around.

The next and final section of the report draws together the key leadership features that these three academies had in common, although in varying degrees. However, while the research highlights the importance of each academy's leadership in responding to the environmental and experiential aspects of each particular predecessor school and tackling difficult and often deep-rooted challenges, other organisational factors appeared to be important in effecting culture change. These were the sponsor background and approach, and the role of CPD for staff. The latter two factors, however, require further exploration before more definite conclusions can be drawn, and we hope to extend the study into the academic year 2013/14 for further investigation.

5.2 Key leadership factors

This final section lists the leadership features that appeared to be key in effecting change in these institutions.

- A leadership style that shared a sense of entrepreneurial risk-taking and innovation (Woods et al, 2007, p.238). This could be seen in innovative approaches to the curriculum, new ways of engaging business communities and a range of different incentives that encouraged student engagement.
- United leadership team. The Principal or Executive Principal was supported by the rest of the leadership team in all elements of academy activity, including engaging staff in changes that often challenged previous or established practice.
- Clarity of vision and purpose. *'Basically you've got to make big changes in the short term and stand by the changes'* (senior teacher). Staff valued clarity and transparency in leaders' communication of the academy improvement plan.
- Establishment of trust and respect in the vision of the leadership. The ability of leaders to maintain purposeful direction, during the often painful periods of adjustment during transition to new ways of working, was appreciated and respected by staff.

- Investment in staff. All staff appreciated the provision of opportunities to develop professionally, together with the time to make sure they could receive maximum benefit from those opportunities.
- Clarity of accountability. While this could be difficult, staff appreciated knowing exactly what was expected of them.
- Empowering staff to be active participants impacting change. Staff were included in the strategic ambitions of the school, rather than acting as observers and facilitators, which provided a clear sense of that school improvement was everybody's responsibility. *"90% of staff now see it [The Marsh Academy] as their school – cleaners, cooks, teachers. It is the seed of change in the last 18 months for behaviour and attendance."* (Senior Teacher)
- Using sponsor expertise to develop and support educational change. Sponsors came from a variety of backgrounds, but this research suggests that the support most valued was related to professional development around teaching and learning from educational sponsors.

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