

One failing school, one dedicated headteacher, one thousand days of creativity. Headteacher, **Andrew Morrish** inspires with the story of his transformational journey from special measures to outstanding.

# One thousand days

Teachers love asking questions. So here's one to get started: What would you rather do?

- (a) Walk around the world three times
- (b) Enjoy ten back-to-back round the world cruises
- (c) Lead a school from special measures to outstanding

Now for the vast majority of people, the answer would probably lie somewhere between (a) or (b). Granted, you'd need a great deal of stamina and time on your hands, but either one would be a great way to spend your days. What might surprise you though, is that all three share one thing in common, and that is they all take about one thousand days to complete. To be even more specific, they'd take about one thousand



school days, so weekends and school holidays don't count. In other words, five school years and five weeks – the exact time it took to lead Victoria Park Primary school from the brink of closure to becoming outstanding. So as much as I'd love to share my experiences of circumnavigating the globe, or sailing singlehandedly across the Pacific, I shall restrict this article solely to the matter at hand: How to transform a failing school by being more creative.

### A quick fix to tackle school failure?

There have been a number of articles in the press recently about how best to deal with failing schools. For years ministers have been grappling with this conundrum. They finally seem to have come up with a solution that's radically simple: sack inadequate teachers as quickly as possible. Failing that, sack the headteacher, shut the school, and re-open it as a brand new Academy with some sponsors who will no doubt guarantee success overnight.

Of course a great many of these so-called 'struggling' schools aren't in fact struggling at all. I know, because only a few months ago I was headteacher of one. Still am for that matter, although the only difference now is that Ofsted have since been and gone and liked very much what they saw. Just over a year ago – Day 812 to be precise – HMI popped in for a day and weren't overly impressed and a few years before that (Day 590) Ofsted said that as a headteacher I didn't know my school and that I wasn't raising standards quick enough. I was devastated and longed to be on that cruise ship (see answer (b) above).

So how did we manage to transform Victoria Park into a school that in 2007 was in the bottom one percent nationally, to an outstanding school just four years later? People often ask me how we did it and how can they do it in their own school. More to the point, can it be done by a week next Tuesday, as Ofsted are due next month? The truth is, you need time, and lots of it if it is to stick. We don't do gimmicks, we don't do quick fixes. It's all about long term sustainability and to achieve that there's only one answer: Creativity.

And therein lies the problem. In order for schools to be turned round quickly creativity is not always the answer. Understandably, the DfE, Ofsted and local authorities all want immediate results. Had I said when I was first interviewed for this job, that I wanted to create, over the next five years, a deeply embedded culture of creativity that will guarantee lifelong learners, then somebody else would probably be writing this article.



**Pupils at Victoria Park on set at their 'crime scene'**

### Day One – The leadership challenge

As I began Day One, I attempted to convince myself that leading a school is a relatively simple concept. All you need to do is surround yourself with likeminded people who believe in the same things as you, enjoy being with children and are good at their job. The trouble is, this takes time and when in special measures time is one thing you don't have. With this in mind, I knew that the first training day would be a tricky one. Pitch it all wrong and you can say goodbye to any possibility of getting the staff on board. I knew that this was the start of a long journey. If I wanted to change the culture of the school to one of continuous long term improvement then it began here. I outlined my vision for the school and where I thought the strengths and weaknesses were. I attempted to convince staff that the school could and will go on to become outstanding. I talked about commitment, values and leadership. They looked at me expectantly.

---

“ This is the key difference between leadership and management: managers do things right but leaders do the right things ”

---

I referred to a BBC wildlife documentary that I'd seen recently. It was about a herd of elephants walking in a line through the wilderness. They were trying to locate water and were on a long journey. Among the herd were several baby elephants clinging to their mother's tails with their trunks, concentrating all the while on walking in a straight line, determined to follow the one in front. A sandstorm blew up and the camera panned back and showed one of the baby elephants become detached from the group and clearly disorientated. He refused to look up, doing only what he'd been shown to do: keep your head down and walk in a straight line, following the one in front. Only the one in front was now going in the opposite direction to the rest of the herd but he couldn't see this for the storm. I remember sitting there, staring at the screen and urging the little one to 'Look up! Look up!', but he didn't. The baby elephant worked harder and harder at doing what he thought was the right thing, concentrating on walking in a straight line with his head down. He was almost certainly walking to his own death.

A rather extreme example, but it did make the point clear. The best leaders would not have allowed this to happen. They would have looked up and seen that although they were doing things right, they were doing the wrong things. This is the key difference between leadership and management: managers do things right but leaders do the right things. For too long, the staff had been 'managed' as opposed to being 'led'. It was now my job to provide leadership. Staff were working exceptionally hard but on the wrong things. It was time to change direction, but unlike the elephant above, we all had to do it together. We had to look up. As Stephen Covey said in his influential book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*<sup>1</sup>, 'the ladder was up the wrong wall'. It was my task as leader to provide them with not only the ladder, but also the wall.

Covey's book proved to be very useful to me as a leader. I would often dip into it to seek inspiration. On many a morning, when things weren't going the way I had planned during the dark days of special measures, I would attempt to 'sharpen my saw' or try and 'create things twice'. Just as Jonny Wilkinson would cup his hands prior to converting a try in an attempt at visualising the ball going between the posts, I too would try and visualise what a successful school would look like. I'd try and create it twice, once in my head, and once for real. Of course, it was a lot easier doing it in my head, but I felt confident that the more often I visualised it the more likely it would happen. Finally on Day 179 we came out of special measures.

### Building a spiral curriculum

As well as Covey's relatively recent research, there is one other educationalist whose work I value. His name is Jerome Bruner and he's well worth a Google. In 1960 he wrote a book called *The Process of Education*<sup>2</sup> and in it he talks a lot about a 'spiral curriculum'. A spiral curriculum, as the name suggests, is one that is continually fluid; the concepts come round time and time again, regardless of age or stage. As a result, skills are continuously reinforced and revisited at different times of life relevant to the learning context. The notion therefore of only doing angles in Year 4 or the Victorians in Year 6 is anathema to a spiral curriculum. For this reason, Bruner is likely to have opposed a National Curriculum built around discrete subjects. I like Bruner very much.

Bruner was adamant that any child, whatever age or ability should be able to access the spiral curriculum. He argued that teachers 'can teach anything to anyone in an intellectually honest manner by translating it courteously for them'<sup>2</sup>. In other words, it matters not one bit how old or young a child is, or whether they are on Free School Meals, are summer born, EAL or SEND. All the teacher has to do is 'translate it courteously' for him, what in the trade is known as good differentiation. And here's another reason why I like Bruner so much: Like me, he would have boycotted the SATs because he would have rightly argued that there is nothing further removed from being 'intellectually honest'



than the shenanigans surrounding the cramming for, and teaching towards, the end of Key Stage tests.

The spiral concept is a key component of a successful curriculum, especially with creativity at its core. As a headteacher, I was well aware that if teaching was to improve to the next level, we simply had to give the teachers a rich and exciting context in which they could ply their trade. A creative, thematic curriculum was therefore essential. In the words of Sir Ken Robinson, if creativity was to be at the heart of the curriculum, then by definition it had to be 'an original idea' and it had to 'add value'. I was sure we were onto a winner if we could combine this with Bruner's concept of a spiral curriculum where the teachers could teach these original and purposeful ideas to anyone. The trouble was, we just didn't have enough time, such was the pressure to deliver quick results. By now we were into Day 600-plus and in the eyes of the DfE we were still a failing school.

### The creativity challenge

Just the thought of it sends shivers down my spine. I am the most uncreative person you will ever know. With this in mind, I have never asked my staff to be creative. We have never in a staff meeting attempted to define creativity in terms of what it looks like or how it can be assessed. Despite this, subject leaders were very aware that we had to make the curriculum more creative and more relevant to our children, the vast majority of whom had very limited opportunities to experience the richness of life. It was therefore our job to provide these creative experiences for them. At first we struggled, perhaps because we were trying too hard. And then one day, my leadership team proposed a radical overhaul of the curriculum, throwing out the traditional subjects and opting for a thematic approach based entirely on children's interests. Despite my initial reservations, I was soon sold on the idea.

So by Day 650 we were launching our own bespoke, creative curriculum that was bursting at the seams with a range of activities and experiences that the children would enjoy. We knew they'd enjoy them because they told us what they wanted to learn. They were their ideas. We created a series of 'hooks' that immediately captured the children's attention at the start of each unit. By ensuring that Learning Outside the Classroom was at the heart of the curriculum (we were a national LOfC finalist in 2011) we were confident that experiences would be memorable, time and time again.

We wanted the children to become better writers, boys especially. To achieve this we created a series of 'Everybody Write Days' where children would arrive at school to be met with unexpected mysteries to solve. On one occasion we commissioned some local actors to be lost time travellers who had mysteriously fallen through a door in the centre of the playground. The children spent the week investigating the strange time portal and interviewing the time travellers.

On another, we borrowed a mobile police unit and 'faked' a crime scene in which an odd looking suitcase had been found in the garden. CCTV footage showed a strange person acting suspiciously. The

**Learning outside the classroom with a lost time traveller.**





children loved being crime investigators and writing all about the stranger. Last term, the children came to school on the Monday only to find a spaceship had crashed on the playground and that FBI agents were trying to locate the missing aliens that had fled into the school building. Only a few weeks ago, we created a scene in which several large crates en route to a local zoo had fallen out of a plane and landed on the playground. On closer inspection, they were a family of meerkats that were now hiding in the school, conveniently one per classroom. Since then, each class has adopted their own toy meerkat as a class mascot. Apparently, so the children tell me, they are all part of the same Bogdan family.

Not surprisingly, attendance increased significantly from a stubborn 92 per cent mark to above average. Writing was on the up. SATs results more than doubled. The Vici 50s were instrumental in improving standards. Consisting of 50 things the children want to experience before they leave our school, the Vici 50s now form an integral part of the creative learning journey. We liked them so much we built the curriculum around them so that they spiral throughout all that they do.

We were very fortunate at the time to be a Creative Partnership school, and were excellently supported by Creative Alliance, who



put us in touch with all manner of creatives to help us build an innovative and child-centred curriculum. We had also just launched 'Building Learning Power' (BLP) on the back of having previously been accredited as an Edward de Bono 'Thinking School'. By then, most of our children were already confident and independent learners, able to use a blend of thinking tools to assist with their learning. Assessment for Learning was embedded across the school and so BLP became the obvious 'next steps'. We wanted our children to be fluent in what Guy Claxton refers to as 'Learnish'<sup>3</sup>. After all, they already speak more than 40 languages between them, so one more wouldn't hurt.



The escaped meerkats

### Day 1,000 and beyond

Following Ofsted's visit on day 999 and 1000, the lead inspector wrote in the report that the 'whole school is currently buzzing with excitement' and that 'pupils bubble over with enthusiasm when talking about the things they learn.' Were you to visit, I am confident you would see the same.

In particular, you would see Learnish in action. Children would be working collaboratively and in small groups as lead learners, perhaps using video cameras to make eHow movies teaching other children how to learn a new skill. These would all be uploaded to VPTV, our own in-house TV station. Class forums,

discussion boards and Wikis would be created at home and in school using our ICT learning platform to help pupils with their learning. ICT would dominate the lessons including Talking Postcards, EasiSpeaks, Visualisers, Laptops, Netbooks, DS Lites and video cameras.

You would observe first-hand the positive impact our recently appointed Creative Learning Apprentice is having. Working in partnership with Creative Alliance she is currently trialling and developing the innovative MonstersWrite programme. The CLA also produces a termly **on-line digital magazine**

**(VPZine)** as well as providing a number of creative learning opportunities both indoors and out.

Children enjoy using BLP to help them when they are stuck (or in the 'Pit' as we call it). When this is the case, they will show high levels of resilience, resourcefulness and reciprocity at working collaboratively in order to get out of the Pit. They might even take a BLP potion to help them with their noticing skills, or to manage distractions or become more absorbed. They may even ask Bogdan for help!

We insist on children being highly active learners. As a result they are skilled at envoying, rainbowing, jigsawing and snowballing – all strategies that help them accelerate their progress through a deeper understanding. Walk into a classroom and you are likely to see children using a range of different coloured thinking hats to help them learn more creatively, or employing a **CoRT1** thinking tool such as a PIB, CAF or FIP.

But most important of all, you will see happy, motivated and excited children who love learning. Not surprisingly, you will also see motivated and happy teachers who are free to create innovative and original lessons that most definitely add value. So if anyone happens to ask you whether you'd rather sail the oceans or travel the world, by all means go for it. But if beforehand you ever get the chance to spend one thousand days transforming the lives of children in a challenging primary school, I thoroughly recommend it. Especially if you can have some fun being creative along the way.

**Andrew Morrish is Headteacher at Victoria Park Primary School  
On 1st April 2012, Victoria Park Primary School converted to academy  
status and is now called Victoria Park Primary Academy.**



### References

- 1) Covey, S (2005) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Simon and Shuster UK Ltd., Glasgow
- 2) Bruner, J (1977) *The process of education*, Harvard University Press, Harvard
- 3) Claxton, G., *The Building Learning Power Series*  
<http://www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk/>

### Knowledge trails

- 1) **In search of creativity** – How a project in one area developed children's creativity by integrating the arts in the curriculum.  
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/in-search-of-creativity.htm>
- 2) **Unlocking creativity** – A case study of one school that devised their own creative curricula to develop personal, social and economic success.  
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/unlockingcreativity.htm>
- 3) **Picking up the pieces** - After Ofsted's shattering verdict, the headteacher of a failing school is left to rally the staff, handle the media and prepare for special measures.  
<http://library.teachingtimes.com/articles/picking-up-the-pieces.htm>  
Article available from School Leadership Today on the Professional Learning Community (access by subscription).