

Working as a group

In one school, we were intrigued to meet a group of young men who said how much they liked English lessons. When we investigated this further, we discovered that the school maintained one group of learners who followed a unique approach to the teaching of English. This group had been set up three years previously when ten thirteen-year-old boys had been identified as being likely to fail academically in this subject. These boys were also pupils who were becoming noticeably disruptive and who were identified by the school as being at risk of exclusion.

With support from the school's managers and some additional finance, the English department agreed to set up a small, discrete group for these boys, working with generous staffing – a teacher and three teaching assistants. This extra staffing was made possible by reducing staffing in the English lessons provided for the rest of that year group. As a consequence, there were higher student numbers in these other teaching groups as well as no support from teaching assistants.

The new English group continued to run until the original cohort of young men were 16. The numbers in the group varied between ten and 14. The group was led by an experienced teacher who developed a radical approach to her teaching. At the outset, the students 'signed up' to an agreement to comply with agreed standards of respect and behaviour towards each other. The initial sessions focused on this theme, with practical sessions devoted to learning about behaviours such as turn-taking or listening to others.

Once this respectful behaviour was established, the focus moved onto the English syllabus. Students were rewarded for their efforts with free time and time spent on preferred activities (such as using the computers). These privileges were removed when appropriate behaviour lapsed. When difficulties of this kind did occur, teaching for the group would revert to a focus on interpersonal skills until positive attitudes towards work and interaction had been re-established. Over time, the behaviour of the students in the group had improved greatly and so had their academic prospects. In the end, every student in the group completed a course of GCSE studies and all but two were entering examinations with expectations of achieving good grades.

When we talked to this group of learners, they unanimously declared that the English group had been an immensely positive experience for them. They were pleased with their unexpected success in English in terms of academic progress. They were also eager to highlight the positive effects that the methods used in the group had had on their self-esteem and confidence and on their capacity to manage their emotions and deal with difficult situations appropriately. They were very clear that these results were due to the attitudes and approaches they experienced in this English group, including being treated like adults, working as a team, and experiencing staff and students working together to make plans and negotiate outcomes. Working to meet the high expectations of every member of the group was also identified

as a key factor – once mutual respect had been established, no-one wanted to let the group down.

The students (and staff) felt strongly that other areas of the school could learn from this exemplary approach. The school had already identified another cohort of students with very similar needs then aged 12 and negotiations were underway to request additional funding to run a similar group for the years ahead.