

## Confidence building through pupil conferencing.

Addressing underachievement of EAL and BME pupils through pupil conferencing.

Fishponds Church of England Academy

Diocese of Bristol

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### Context

Fishponds Church of England Academy is a large primary school based in the Fishponds suburb of Bristol, a socially and ethnically diverse community. The school's population reflects this diversity with approximately 35% of children for whom English is not their first language and around 70% of pupils from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds. The school catchment area contains wards within the 10% most deprived in England and approximately 35% of children are in receipt of Pupil Premium.

Within this context, the school identified a particular issue of under-achievement amongst some EAL (English as an Additional Language) and BME boys. A combination of low self-esteem and low resilience, particularly with boys in Key Stage 2, was leading to low attainment in writing. At the start of the project only 15.9% of boys in Year 5 and 29% of boys in Year 4 were predicted to meet the expected standard in writing by the end of the academic year, compared to 29% and 44% of girls respectively.

Staff could see that if the boys left the school with this low attainment and low confidence they would struggle to make up progress at secondary school. Fishponds applied for an Unlocking Gifts grant so that they could help improve the life chances of these boys.

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### The project

Fishponds wanted to achieve four main outcomes: for BME and EAL boys in Year 4 and Year 5 to have increased self-esteem and resilience; to narrow the attainment gap between boys and girls; for behavioural incidents among the target group of boys to decrease; and for relationships within the class to improve. To achieve these aims Fishponds built a programme based on pupil conferencing. This method involved one-to-one sessions where the class teacher could work with small groups of boys who were identified as below age related expectations in writing. The pupils were also selected based on who would benefit most from the pastoral support that the conferencing process enabled.

By working one-to-one with their trusted class teacher, the boys were able to build their resilience and focus on their individual academic needs. The teachers helped them review their work and identify the next steps they needed to take to improve their learning.

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Due to the absence of a key teacher the programme started later than originally planned because the school recognised how important it was that teachers known and trusted by the pupils carried out the conferencing. When the programme was able to commence, the Unlocking Gifts grant was used to release the class teachers from ordinary lessons for one afternoon per week to carry out these individual sessions. Across the two funded years the school ran the programme four times, working with 15 pupils in the first year and 19 pupils in the second year of the funding.

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### What worked?

All the pupils who took part in the first year of the project made progress, with many moving to 'expected levels' and some not quite reaching expected levels but still making rapid progress. For example, one pupil from the first year of the project made four years' progress in the space of 12 weeks. The school recognised from the start that a key element in the success of the project was the involvement of the pupils' regular class teachers. Despite the programme starting later than planned, the existing pupil-teacher relationships meant the teachers could offer immediate support rather than needing to first spend time developing trust and rapport. They also had a pre-existing understanding of the motivations and individual needs of the pupils that meant they were best placed to help improve the boys' self-esteem, confidence and academic progress.

The success of working with the class teacher in a small group setting came out in the pupils' own comments as they reported feeling supported by their peers and their teacher.

*Your friends help you in the group and if you make a mistake nobody laughs - they support me.*

(Pupil)

In the first year the programme was run twice over two twelve-week periods with a fixed group of boys. In the second year a more flexible approach was taken with the teachers working with pupils across an extended period of time (September to Easter), selecting small groups depending on the needs at the time. At the end of the second year, the results again showed that all the participating pupils made progress. 31% of pupils in the project group made accelerated progress compared to 16% of the rest of the pupil cohort. A comparison between the project group and the rest of their cohort also showed that the conferencing had narrowed the attainment gap between the target group and their peers, thereby achieving one of the main aims of the project.

Interviews with the pupils before and after the programme also showed that their self-esteem and confidence had improved. Pupils said they enjoyed writing and they felt they could write and use punctuation well.

*The group helps you with your writing. It helps me achieve my targets...and it's basically really helpful in general.*

*I like writing. I like a challenge. I have learnt how to do relative clauses, subordinate clauses, main clauses - I've learnt all of my targets.*

*I feel more engaged as I find it easier to just get on and write.*

(quotes from pupils involved in the project)

The intervention with pupils also led to wider benefits both within the small groups and when back together as a whole class. The selected pupils benefited from being introduced to concepts in advance of them being taught to the whole class and teachers also noticed that they became more confident to volunteer answers in class. Their peers also benefited as, due to the target pupils having the additional input they needed, they did not require so much attention and the teachers were able to spend more time with other pupils not in the project group.

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### What next?

Fishponds felt that the project had been so valuable they continued the programme using their own funds for the rest of the 2018/19 academic year. The school has shown that it is possible for the programme to be mainstreamed to some extent, although it does require considerable funding in order to release the class teachers to work with the small groups. For this reason, Fishponds cannot offer the same amount of time for teachers out of class, but they do hope to release the class teacher for at least some time to carry on the coaching model for some of the children.

Furthermore, the school has learnt valuable lessons about engaging pupils and providing them with specific targets and they have also been able to spread this good practice to other schools. In the autumn term 2018, the headteacher and diocesan adviser showcased the project at the Bristol Diocesan Education conference, sharing their method and helping to establish the legacy of this effective programme.