

# TALES FROM THE CUPBOARD

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of his Creative Partnerships Kent Residency 03/04**

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## INTRODUCTION

Between September 2003 and July 2004 I worked at a large secondary school catering for about 1300 students as part of a placement funded by Creative Partnerships Kent. When I initially planned my residency I stated that my aim would be to "change thinking" within the school and I looked forward to working within an educational environment made up of professionals interested in learning. Throughout my residency, I looked at ways of influencing the way the school was working, through the teachers, the students and also senior management team. I worked as broker, artist, provocateur and as facilitator.

Of course, because the residency was over one complete year, this report can only give a flavour of everything that happened. Nevertheless I have tried to give what I hope is a full picture. What follows includes observations from my experiences at the school together with notes recording my everyday experiences. I offer these not to highlight the school in any particular light but with the understanding that these experiences are in fact not unique and so give an insight into aspects of secondary school education that are not usually heard due to party politics, school league tables and so on.

My belief is that for education to move forward it must acknowledge where it is moving from as well as where it might possibly go. Only then can a workable strategy be implemented that has any hope of successfully taking us forward with an education that the youth of this country deserve.

## BACKGROUND

I had worked at the school before on a previous project. For that, I had assumed the role of outside facilitator in conjunction with a selected group of students; however, it did not allow me to get a real understanding of what the school was like. This time therefore I wanted to work 'from the inside' and so I began my residency by being at the school as much as I could bear in order to get an understanding of how it was to actually be there.

From this, a number of things became apparent, the most obvious of which was that for the teaching staff the school is definitely a work place, with stresses and pressures. I listened in on a conversation between some teachers on one of the first days back at the beginning of the autumn term and heard them talking about feeling (in their stomachs) the impending stress of the coming school year towards the end of their summer holiday, before they had even returned to school. One of the teachers said that it actually made her feel physically sick.

I also witnessed this pressure having an open effect on the actual teaching environment. Here is an extract from my notes of Monday 8<sup>th</sup> September. Note that this is the beginning of term and not the week before exams....

*I then spent the first part of the morning working from Jackie's office (with open window so pupils entering the Phoenix Centre could see me working and say hello, whilst simultaneously listening to a class in the next room. The teacher delivered information in sergeant major style whilst the students listened. She emphasised results: "I see no reason as to why we can't achieve such and such a grade", as well as details of what marks they would need to get an A\* or an A. She told the students that she hoped they could understand the sort of pressure she was under and so would be able to understand why she would be working them so hard.*

*She then talked through various aspects of choreographing a dance, asking questions and telling them the answers or giving them the answers if they said the wrong ones.*

*After the lesson I met the teacher and asked her how her class went. She said she was stressed, as no doubt I would have been able to hear, but she had no option, as there was no time to teach in any other way. There are now seven periods in the day, the timetable having been rearranged from last year's six periods, and so the teachers are having to deliver the same information in less time, and therefore feel under stress.*

The school then is a place where stress is accepted and modelled through behaviour. My example above tells of a situation where a teacher tells her students that she is not only under stress but actually passes this onto the students in the hope that this will make them work harder. Both teachers and students know of teachers who are on long-term stress-related leave, and there is also a high level of teacher absenteeism through sickness. This leaves the school with an enormous bill to cover the costs of temporary teacher supply and in turn there is a feeling of financial limitation amongst the staff.

The school also suffers from a lack of space to introduce new ideas and to encourage new ways of working. What's interesting is that the head teacher appears keen to free up the teaching of his staff and to introduce new (and more creative) approaches to education. Apart from my residency, this appears to be mainly done through the occasional staff training days where time is set aside for the dissemination of teaching related material. However, the school's day-to-day timetable affords little time to try out new ideas and so the result is, that when it comes to practicalities, the teaching staff feels limited by the unforgiving timetable and the pressures that it creates in an already stressful result-orientated environment.

*"I have got a very strong gut feeling that if we encourage creativity within the school population, their examination success will be greater; their results will improve, without a doubt. However, a major concern that I think we have to be aware of is in going towards that, if we time it wrong, there will be a dip because it's something new and something the kids aren't used to, and we have to make sure that that dip in performance doesn't happen at the time of their examinations because we might get a whole cohort of students going through examinations who all have a massive drop in their grades and in which case we have failed them. They are all people and I don't want to fail anyone of those people.*

*"We have to look at the student's life beyond the twelve or thirteen years that they spend in school. That's just a small part of their life. They have the rest of their life in front of them. If we can give them greater skills in creativity, I think they will have a more fulfilling life; they will have a better life. If we do that at the expense of those hoops that they have to jump through, which are GCSEs and A levels; if we get them leaving school fantastically creative energetic rowdy people but without those pieces of paper, doors will be closed in their faces and we have to work within the constraints of a system which is imposed upon us. I passionately believe that they will be better people for it and they will eventually get where they want to go but I don't want kids leaving school at the age of sixteen or at the age of eighteen and having doors, as I've said, slammed in their faces because they don't have a piece of paper. They need it. Once the door is open they will do much better because of their natural creativity, but they need their entry requirements to so many colleges, universities, professions. They need that. Once they get there, they will be great, but we can't deny them the chance by taking away that piece of paper."*

[TV – Director of Performance Music]

For the students, it is an environment, for the most, lacking in fun and also boring. They are aware that they are there to be educated and that this includes working, otherwise the teachers “will have a go at you”. Most that I have spoken to accept that part of growing up is to also accept and work with stress and pressure.

This combination of perceived pressure and tight timetabling coupled with an ethos of encouraging creativity produces a confusing environment for those working within the school.

*“There is some skepticism because teachers feel very loaded with the amount of work that they have to do, and I think they are willing and want to understand this but they want to understand it within a framework of something which doesn’t burn them anymore.*

*“We are very aware that we need to be working in the way that Robert has flagged up with us but we are working within an exam context where there are measurable products. Whatever we do, whatever we might want to do, we have got to be accountable for the children who opt for our subjects being successful in those subjects, and what I think we have got to try and do now is to try and work out how we can use these processes actually to reach those products, so the product itself isn’t lessened in anyway and isn’t watered down but that somehow the process is more in their control, more enriching.”*

[JM – Assistant Head]

From speaking to artists and teachers involved in other Creative Partnerships projects in Kent, I discovered that my situation at the school was not unique. It seems that the school is not alone in appearing to favour a system that appears to be designed to make it easier for teachers to produce results, rather than for students to learn.

Throughout the year I became convinced that this, ultimately, was a major flaw in the school's organisation as an education system, as it seemed to encourage a teacher directed style of instruction, a disenchantment amongst students, a perceived need for increased discipline and a feeling of pressure felt by all. In short, it adds up to an education system that actually appears to rob creativity of the oxygen it needs to sustain itself. The result being that when someone does pursue something out of the usual it has usually been the result of a lot of effort and consequently, as the system is so slow to react to change, there is little incentive for any (immediate) escalation or development of an idea.

Thus, it became clear to me that I was now involved in an enormous problem. Here I was, being used to encourage people to think more creatively, but in an environment that appeared to be first and foremost concerned with examination results. Consequently, teachers tend to be suspicious of anything that they think might detract from these results.

The environment of the school is such that the members of the teaching staff tend to follow ‘either/or’ train of arguments. Rarely, for example, was it recognised that I could be interested in working towards a system that had creativity as its focus and also produce good results.

Although I could speak with some authority on creative processes I had little credibility when it came to any argument based on examination results, and so I had to work out ways of working that brought both worlds together.

I tried to do this in a number of ways as set out below.

## **WORKING METHOD**

One aspect of my residency was to include me working at the school as an artist-in-residence. For this, I was to be based in a self-contained studio space donated by Pfizers. The plan was that I would be able to work on-site in my capacity as a sound artist, to work as an artist-role-model and for this to be the stimulus for students to interact with me.

This way of working attracted the attention of linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath who is interested in the differences between artists' workspaces and other environments and also how the artist working as a role model can affect change. Throughout the year therefore Shirley and various other researchers came to the school to observe language change.

As it happened, this promise of studio space never transpired, although it wasn't until the summer term that I eventually gave up any hope of its appearance. My residency therefore took on board a flexible nature that constantly expected the studio space to arrive. This continual non-appearance of my promised studio was an annoying and limiting factor.

I did manage to secure a small space (without windows) to work from early in the first term, and so used this as a base. (In my notes I refer to this room as the 'Cupboard'). However, this was not really adequate for what I had originally planned and so I altered my plan from the studio-based-residency model to one where I was more active around the school. This in turn introduced a level of frustration in my residency as I found my time not so much creating but spent brokering, as I tried to make projects happen that didn't require using an extra space, in a system that was clearly not designed for cross-curricular collaboration. In turn, this created various challenges for Shirley and her team (and for the outside project evaluators) as my methods of working changed from day to day and within each day as I tried to find effective ways of working within the school environment.

Each way of working highlighted various creative blocks inherent in the school's educational system, and as a result I became interested in discovering just what it was that needed to be implemented for creativity to flourish, not just in this school but also in other schools, and with minimum intervention.

Over the length of my residency I worked in the following four ways: -

### **1. AS BROKER**

I quickly discovered that I was not alone in suffering from a lack of adequate working space. In fact there appeared to be very little room throughout the whole school that was readily available for the accommodation of new projects for students or staff to work outside of the classroom environment, if that's what was desired.

For this reason I attempted to encourage teachers to take on board projects as an extension of their classroom activities; however, I was continually surprised at just how difficult it was to work with the teachers in this way. Although they would express an interest in working with me, when it came to it they had very little time to get a project off the ground.

From my point of view, I wanted to do more than simply run a series of projects with or for various classes. Instead, I wanted to be considered a catalytic resource that teachers could utilise to make it easier for them to do something a little different. For this reason, I wanted them to be involved in the actual organisation of whatever their project was to be as well as being a part of the running of it so that in turn they might be in a better position to do more self-initiated projects in the future.

It soon became apparent though that physical space was not the only thing lacking in the school. The teachers also had very little time, not only to commit to the actual organising but also to actually think about new ideas. Meetings would be organised in the brief snippets of

time available and then decisions would be made that would often seem to me to be unnecessarily bureaucratic. Seemingly simple tasks such as photocopying appeared daunting, and a teacher could suddenly find themselves with extra teaching on their hands if they were asked to cover for an absent member of staff.

This lack of time would take its toll on even the most visionary teachers. I was lucky to have one of the more enlightened staff as my Creative Partnerships School Coordinator throughout my residency, but even someone with her energy, in the end, had to give in to the pressures of school life. Here is my diary entry for Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> May: -

*To be fair to Jackie, she has done a good job of CP coordinator in many ways. We started off well, although it soon became apparent that it was necessary for her to have CP time allocated to her. This we got from the headteacher: up to four free periods a week; however, this was very quickly reduced to half that time and then just snatches of meetings in which most of the time was spent by Jackie telling me about the school. Then during spring term my time with Jackie went completely, and as a result I concentrated my time on the students. Certainly, this has affected the residency and the quality of any outcome.*

*For quite some time now I have been told that after half term Jackie will have absolutely no time. Luckily, the rest of term will be taken up with the Jamie Dance Project; however, there is in fact so much that could be arranged for the following academic year.*

*Currently, Jackie does not want to lose the post of CP Coordinator, and this is argued in terms of wanting there to be a connection with the Phoenix Centre as well as her belief that apart from a couple of the Phoenix Centre staff, there are no teachers who would be able to take the task on. It is so sad that there has been no time for an open consideration of this. Instead, it is rushed, with no discussion of what might actually suit me best as one of the instruments of change. There is also little acknowledgement of 'paying back' CPK in terms of more dedicated time as a thank you for their unique support that the school profits from. This is not to say that the school is not appreciative, it's just that from where I stand it does not seem to be interested in making the best of this unique (and finite) opportunity. If the school is not careful, it is going to wake up in a year or so's time with Creative Partnerships gone and an opportunity, not exactly wasted, but certainly not made the most of.*

*I think I could do with meeting other CP school coordinators. It would be good to see what they are doing, and how much they are being supported. Who knows? It might be that the situation in this school is the best of the lot!*

Perhaps the most interesting project to be brokered was one involving Newham Sixth Form College (known as NewVIc) from East London. This involved inviting Jo Parkes, a teacher choreographer based at the college, to come to the school and facilitate a collaboration between Phoenix Centre dance teaching staff and other teaching staff within the school. In the end three collaborating non-dance teachers were involved, one from the Maths department and two from the English department. Each dance teacher teamed up with a non-dance teacher and team-taught a planned unit of work.

Right from the point when the teachers were put together to plan how they would work together it was obvious that all the hard work in planning this project was going to be worth it, as can be seen from my diary of Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> April: -

*It was lovely to hear the conversations get louder and more excited as the teachers brainstormed ideas and then the conversation level dropping as they devised what they would do. At one point Jackie went to find one of the senior management team just so they could hear this strange phenomenon of excited teachers! Of course, time was limited and so when the period alarm sounded everyone had to wrap up what they were doing. As they did this, the teacher's remarked, "isn't it a shame we've got to stop", "it's a great idea", "it will be well fun", "Richard, it's going to be good" and "fantastic buzz".*

The result of this team-teaching-across-subjects exercise provided the teachers with something new and something fun. When both teachers worked together in the same space one teacher would always be a learner, as they did not share the same subject knowledge. Thus the sessions presented a natural scenario for the teachers to present themselves as co-learners.

Since this particular project I have supported a further collaboration between the Science and Dance departments, and since that time one of the dance teachers has also begun a collaboration with the media department.

*"Both of the classes involved thoroughly enjoyed the added input from Sian and Chris. The two sessions for each class allowed children with limited ability in mathematics to explore concepts in kinaesthetic way. Every student spoken to by the team were enthusiastic about the work they did. Follow up sessions showed a higher degree of retention than would usually be expected of these two groups.*

*"Once again thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to working with you with any future projects of this type."*

[AL, Head of Mathematics]

There were three things that most impressed me about this particular project. First, the language change in the teachers as they worked together as equals to plan how they would construct their joint lesson. (I heard the teachers move from the more usual 'closed' language made up of statements with fixed answers to one where the statements were 'open' and generative). Secondly, I was impressed that the classes were actually fun for both staff and students; and thirdly, that once up and running I was virtually redundant as it seemed that all the teachers required was the time, and then it seemed self-fuelling.

As a result, I am in dialogue with the head teacher to consider how this type of teacher collaboration can continue within the school. The current train of thought is that those teachers who want to engage in this way will be taken off teacher cover time, thus allowing them a little time to think and plan and a reward for doing so.

Another project in progress is the 'Our Space' project. This aims to not only encourage students to think of the school as "their school" but also to practically demonstrate that their views are important and that they can make a difference. The project involves the redesigning and actual re-landscaping of one of the central features of the school, namely, the area outside the canteen. This area is, in theory, a grass lawn with paths for students to use to get to classes. In reality though, the students don't always use the paths and the result is that for much of the year the area in question becomes an unsightly muddy mess.

The project was the idea of the school's Head of Technology who wanted to work with his Year 10 students on something that actually had a real outcome instead of the more usual virtual assignment. With the help of researcher Elke Paul-Boehncke working with a student

research team (as part of Shirley Brice Heath's Observation Project) a questionnaire was drawn up and then filled in by every student in the school. The research team has now presented the results of their findings to the head teacher.

From next term I have arranged with landscape architect Tom LaDell to work with GCSE Design students and also the school's senior management team in order to give them the confidence to move forward.

As my residency is very much about change, this project has a certain amount of significance for me. A lot of what I am doing is small, perhaps even invisible to many; however, the 'Our Space' project concerns actual physical change right in the heart of the school. My hope is that this will provide those at the school with (literally) concrete proof that change is happening and that as a school it is time to embrace this change and move on.

## **2. AS ARTIST**

As my working space was in The Dance Department, it wasn't too long before they took advantage of my composing skills. I produced scores for numerous dances and these were mostly created in conjunction with the students and dance teachers. Surprisingly, there had been very little, if any, working with live music before and so this provided a new experience as all concerned had to accept the unknown nature of the final product.

As I worked on the pieces, students would come and join me in my workspace and I would include them in the compositional process. Many of the students hadn't considered how a piece of music was put together before and so this opportunity provided an interesting insight as well as allowing a sense of ownership in the work.

*"Working with Robert has made me enjoy music so much more. The way he has taught me to play with sounds and make my own rhythms is brilliant. He has shown me many techniques in music making which has made music more special to me."*  
[Nick – student]

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*"A fresh way of thinking and creating movement material is always both exciting and inspiring, and Robert didn't only meet these expectations but exceeded them. I personally became inspired by his way of looking at music, which I hope came through the performance I took part in. I now feel that music and dance are such an important pair that they should be considered equally and so when I next find music to fit a dance I will consider finding the music first in order to have a strong correlation between the two."*

[Rhian - student]

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*"Refreshingly different. Working with an original score was exciting and made the work feel more 'home made'. I have learned a lot more about the way I move and how I feel about my dance space. It has helped me appreciate the music I am dancing too and understand the ways it is made. It has also helped me learn new ways in which I can move co-existing with the music."*

[Alex - student]

I also ran an improvisation class for interested students. Surprisingly, there appeared to be only one slot where free studio time was available, and this was on a Monday afternoon, and so I held the classes then. These sessions explored contemporary movement improvisation techniques and provided a fascinating diversion for those students that took part. Again, I found the limited time available to be a block as to what I felt could be achieved. The school is rural with the majority of students relying on buses to take them to and from home. Therefore the fact that the only time available for this appeared to be after school prevented students from taking part.

My final work-as-artist project was as part of a collaboration with two other artists: choreographer Jamie Watton and video artist Ben Johnson. Together we worked on an inter-generational performance fusing our three art forms and involving a number of students and their relations. This was a good project for me to finish my residency on. I was not alone in really enjoying my time working with the other artists as all three of us felt that we spoke the same language. For myself, this meant that I had the joy of working on a more natural artistic level than that afforded to me in my other work in the school. The earlier pieces I had done for the dance department, for example, didn't really involve me working in a way that I considered stretched my artistic practice, and so for this final project it was good to be involved in something that was artistically engaging as well as educationally interesting.

*"Thank you for such a wonderful experience in creating 'Fragile'. I think I've discovered the meaning of collaboration again...hurrah!"*

[JW]

### **3. AS PROVOCATEUR**

During the first term I paid most attention to engaging with staff, not only trying to broker projects with them but also to challenge what I observed in the school. In the head teacher's mind he considered this "asking of difficult questions" an important part of my residency. Again and again, I questioned teachers' practice that I considered unethical or inefficient and was constantly surprised at the low level of argument that they had to offer in return. It was quite clear that much teaching technique rested on worn out assumptions that were basically excuses for the teachers to exercise control over the students. Some teachers did listen though.

In October, for example I began what was to be a series of conversations with a group of PGCE students. Our discussions were often heated and with much disagreement; well, to begin with anyway.... Here is the diary entry of my first (chance) meeting with them on Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> October: -

*I explained why I was at the school and discussed with them a wide-range of topics connected with the learning environment. I said that at the moment my most common observation from sitting in on classes was the way teachers used threats as a technique to control their students. ("If you don't stop talking, you'll all stay behind...." "If you don't behave, we'll take out our exercise books and do so something else...." "If you waste my time, then I'm going to waste yours...." and so on.) I said it was not uncommon to hear three threats in a class period, and if that happened six periods a day then that was eighteen threats a day, ninety a week, about one and a half thousand a term, and so on. I said that it wasn't that I thought the threats were necessarily harmful when looked at individually, but questioned as to what their accumulative effect might be, especially when one remembered that a lot of these kids didn't exactly return home to an idyllic scenario when they left school at the end*

of the day. I explained that, for me, what was worrying about confrontational teaching methods was the implication that they carried regarding how worthwhile you considered the person you were addressing was. When you were spoken to in this manner what did that tell you about how you were thought of, and what be the accumulated effect of feeling like that maybe a hundred times a week? I said, in contrast I wanted students to enjoy my lessons and believe that they (the pupils) were worthwhile and important. One of the PGCE students said that she thought that the confrontational addressing of students was sometimes OK and that I was being too idyllic. I said that I knew that what I was proposing was not easy, but that we had to move on, and there were plenty examples of good practice around the world that we could all learn from. I spoke a little about the necessity of creativity in education and a little about Ken Robinson (whom, of course, they had not heard of). (How difficult would it be to make a book such as 'Out of Our Minds' a compulsory part of every student teacher's training, and why is this problem not being tackled?). I said that I would give them some copies of the 'All Our Futures' synopsis, which actually has a lot of good stuff in it worth unpacking. As it happens, one of the PGCE students (Jo) was in my English class that I led yesterday afternoon, and so I was able to refer to that as an example of a non-threatening environment with enjoyment as its process focus. Without doubt all the kids got something out of that class, and from about halfway through the session they were clamouring to read out their work, and more importantly than all of that, they left with a higher level of self-esteem than when they went in. Jo couldn't disagree with any of this.

By the end of the first term there was less disagreement. Here is my diary entry for Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> December: -

*After lunch I went to the staff room and had an opportunity to speak with the PGCE students. One of the students said they were cold, to which I replied "no wonder" as she only had a light top on and a jacket/suit. I suggested that it was woolly jumper weather but her reply was that her formal dress was important as it set her apart from the students. I said that I didn't really think that what I wore had any negative affect in the classroom. (I'm not extreme in my dress!) She said that it was important to her not to appear as a (sixth form) student. I suggested that this might be more a problem for her rather than for her students. Anyhow, I quite like the confusion. I have heard it said more than once, for example, that it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between the staff and students in the Phoenix centre.*

*The discussion with the PGCE student/teachers was interesting. Conversations in the past have highlighted disagreements in approaches to teaching in the classroom with claims that my theories are idyllic and not compatible with the realities of school life. This time I felt more of an openness to what I was saying, in particular to my developing ideas on the "you"/"I" versus "we" approaches to teaching and how that seems to have a knock on affect on teaching style (less opportunities for confrontational propositions) as well as making a focus on enjoyment easier. I also spoke about how the "we" approach could also lead to a "you"/"we" situation at the point where responsibilities were handed over to the students, and spoke about how I did this on my projects and how it affected the students. I said that I loved the way students assumed the responsibilities given to them and especially how they grew as a consequence. As the PGCE student/teachers I was talking to were teachers of "Citizenship" I said that surely my proposed models must fit with the very essence of what they were teaching. After all, I guessed, isn't citizenship about the assumption of responsibility within a context of respect? The PGCE students acknowledged this and my arguments but still had difficulties in their practical application. I said that actually, as far as I was concerned, it was extremely simple: I treated people with the same*

*respect: often to the delight of young people, but sometimes to the annoyance of adults. One of the PGCE students said that I was being idyllic again as they were under observation as part of their college course which expected them to teach the pupils in a structured formal environment with definite teacher-student boundaries so that they would not take advantage. I said that I wasn't talking about anarchy, just a different structure with respect at its centre, and that although I occasionally had discipline problems mostly I didn't have the problems that they were afraid of. I finished by saying that the "we" environment is a more pleasant environment than the "you"/"I" alternative, not only for the students but also for the teacher.*

One of the PGCE students had a 'road to Damascus' experience, which amused me, as he was actually a trained Bishop. I was happy to know that I had played a part in the conversion of a man of the cloth!

*"He started to speak to us about creativity and teaching and he was making all sorts of comments that challenged the structured approach that we're given as student teachers. I have to admit, I didn't like the sound of it. I'm quite comfortable trying to meet all the current grades and levels and then here he is trying to explain to me about all these other skills. I just couldn't see it happening, and I told him that and so did the other students.*

*"He gave me a document this morning headed 'Teaching and Creativity', something like that, but I read through it and as I was reading it I just said to myself, "This is going to happen". The observations that are made, the conclusions drawn in the document, such as academic qualifications aren't enough anymore, they need these other skills, and then it lists some. I just sat there reading it, thinking that's true. I want to teach those things. I want to teach the kids that I teach how to manage their time, how to prioritise tasks. I do want them to learn that; and that was different from a few weeks ago. I struggle now with how I am going to do that. I don't know how I am going to teach those, but I am convinced that that's the right thing to do."*

[RF – PGCE Trainee Teacher]

For the rest of Russell's time at the school I worked with him to help him teach in a more creative way. I introduced him to small but effective ways of changing his classroom dynamic. These ideas (which I call 'switches') introduced the idea of enjoyment as a focus in his preparation, using the classroom space in different ways and how he spoke with the students. Here is my diary extract for Monday 1<sup>st</sup> December: -

*I encouraged him to pay attention to the language he used in the classroom. I said that, for example, I always presented myself as a co-learner and therefore I preferred to use inclusive language, such as "we" as opposed to differentiating between "I", the teacher, and "you", the student(s). It is also interesting to note that there is much more to language than just words. A few teachers have now commented on how the students speak to me and how I talk to the students, and the more I see and hear how other teachers address their students, the more I realise why they make this observation. It has come to my attention that many teachers (even the 'good' ones) talk at their students, sometimes to and rarely with. Sometimes I hear a teacher ask a student a question but on many occasions the student is not allowed the space to reply in his or her own way, and even rarer is when the teacher then bases their reply on the student's reply...*

*Fairly simple stuff, but it's all connected with the students being able to assume identities of thinking people. Without these basic rehearsed skills the job of any teacher attempting to give their students space to think for themselves is very difficult. Russell, for example, wanted his class to make up simple sketches in French. It wasn't that the students didn't know the French, they were not confident in expressing themselves and thinking and discussing their own ideas on their own within the classroom situation.*

*On arriving back at the Phoenix Centre I talked with one of the teachers. I commented that she was so lucky to be teaching in a building that wasn't full of desks. I said that I had noticed that they were nothing but a hindrance in the classrooms that I had been in as they dispersed the students too widely for the teacher to affect any real control over the class and acted as defining barriers for the student v teacher scenario. I spoke about my last lesson with Russell, and how I had noticed that every time he had something important to say he went behind his desk to say it. It was interesting that the students were never 100% quiet when he did this. At one point Russell had asked me to speak to the class and I began talking from where I was at but the class were not as quiet as I would have liked and so I stood up and walked in amongst them whilst talking, and then the class was very quiet. This proximity helped me to talk to the students, rather than the feeling of being talked at. I also spoke about how this tied in with the "we" or "you" / "I" attitudes towards teaching. Sian said that she had been trying to us "we" in her lessons. I said that the other advantage about using "we" was that it became unnatural to shout in the lesson.*

Before the PGCE students left the school they all decided to choose the subject of the role of creativity in education as their final research essay. They asked me if I would help them with it: answer their questions and point them in the direction of suitable reading material.

#### **4. AS FACILITATOR**

I also worked in the school as a facilitator of projects. With the staff, I worked with them on units of work but stretched over, say, three periods. The model that I worked to involved the teacher teaching the first class, with me sitting (and helping, if necessary). I then would offer to take the second class, and this would afterwards lead into discussion with the teacher about teaching process. For the third period, we would work together team teaching again.

*"I have worked with Robert on a number of occasions and can testify to the valuable contribution that he has made to the school.*

*"He came into a class with me and transformed a half-formed idea that we had into a fully workable activity that challenged everyone – students, Robert and me. What we achieved in that lesson was absurd, cerebral, innovative and enormous fun. He had the ability to remove from students the feelings of inhibition and inadequacy and give them a sense of freedom and creativity. It inspired me to think more carefully about what I wanted to do in the classroom and gave me the confidence to try out some more ideas."*

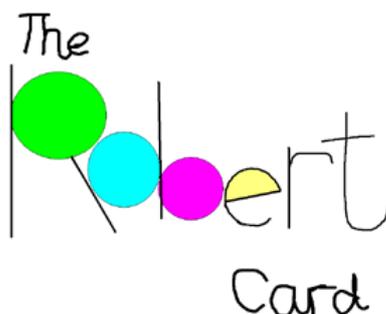
[JO – English Teacher]

Although I discovered this to be a good way of working with teachers I found it to be not one of much interest to me as a practising artist. I also noted that although teachers that I was

worked with were often interested enough to take on board some of my ideas, there wasn't the escalation of new practice that I had hoped for. Teachers appeared to be too consumed by their workload to continue to invest energy and time in thinking up engaging new ideas – almost as if they felt trapped within the school's educational framework.

I therefore decided to change my way of working and concentrate on working with the students. For this I developed the concept of 'The Robert-card'. This was a sort of trump card for those students interested in working on their own individual projects in association with myself. Students who came to see me to propose a project would be given a card as a proof that they were working on a recognised project. By showing the card to a teacher they could request permission to be excused from their class in order to work on their own initiative. The understanding was that any project work would not be instead of normal school work but in addition to. Therefore the pupils had also to recognise that they had to take responsibility for their learning and management of time and were expected to demonstrate that they were capable of keeping up with their work. The ultimate choice of whether a student could be excused from a class though rested with the teacher who could refuse if they felt it appropriate.

It did not take too long for a small number of students to realise what a good thing this card was, and I was impressed with the mature way each one used the card. Students who had projects would excuse themselves from classes and either work in my workspace or in one of the spare music rooms and it was not long before I realised that there was a flaw in my planning, as now – because of the space available – I had virtually no thinking or creating time for myself as it seemed that there was a steady flow of students coming in to visit me, if not to do projects then just to chat. Nevertheless, I was convinced that this idea did need to be followed through. From what I had seen of what went on in classes I was of the opinion that it would do no harm for the students to be occasionally excused. It might even do them some good!



All did not run smoothly though. Before long, there were murmurings amongst some of the staff as they perceived that I was only working with the 'bad' students. Here is an extract from my diary of Tue 25<sup>th</sup> November: -

*I also spoke with Katie, one of the Science teachers. She expressed concern over Zack's behaviour in other classes and informed me that he is on report at the moment due to bad behaviour. Katie wanted my opinion as to what to do. She expressed an opinion that privileges such as involvement with my projects should be stopped until he demonstrated better behaviour in class. I said that my opinion was that education was a right and not a privilege, that she should know that anyone who worked with me*

*worked hard and that she was welcome to come and see this for herself, and that possibly there was a more interesting approach. For example, I have no problems with Zack's behaviour, and to my knowledge nor does Jackie. Zack therefore must have a different relationship with us than with certain other teachers if he chooses to behave better. I proposed to Katie that instead of stopping these relationships through the curtailing of Zack's art activities, we could instead use our relationship with Zack to encourage him to work harder in his other lessons. Katie thought that this could work, and encouraged me to take an interest in his school report and chat through his progress with him. I said I would have a go, and asked her to let me know from time to time how he was getting on in his other lessons.*

In the end, Zack did get off school report. This is how he described the process to me: -

*"Before this project started, I was on green report - a behaviour sheet - and the teachers were a bit worried because I was on report and I was doing Europhonix. What they didn't see was that how could I be doing something good when I'm doing something bad, but because I started to behave well because I wanted to stay in Europhonix I'm off that report and I'm doing Europhonix now."*

[Zack - student]

One of the Assistant Heads describes the situation in this way: -

*"I began to worry that we might only be promoting the "bad students" - managing them well within the context of our situation, but not managing to change much beyond our immediate circle. As we go into the third term, I realise I was wrong...the influence is beginning to work. I can name several students who have learnt about managing situations and people effectively...I have seen change - it's small things at the moment, but it's probably not at all small to each of these individuals...."*

At the end of the school year I asked this teacher to review the situation again. This is what she wrote: -

*"When Zack started Year 9 he had some problems with settling to work and indeed experienced a number of issues related to forging good relationship with his form tutor.*

*"Over the year Zack actively sought more opportunities to work in the Phoenix centre with Robert. He and Daniel were regular visitors.*

*"Their first project was to work on the Promenade Performance with Robert and they collected sounds and made a score which was reflective of school life. This score accompanied a visual projection show.*

*"After this Zack sometimes alone and sometimes with Dan became a main stay in the Robert cupboard.*

*"Over time I noticed a change in Zack – although it is true to say that Zack had always been positive in the Phoenix Centre and had always enjoyed performing arts lessons. The change I noticed can be identified through two specific occasions: His working relationship with his form tutor...they had grown together and she and Zack seemed*

to enjoy each other's company. For her part the form tutor was relaxed around him and for his part Zack managed to be non-confrontational and to have added an appropriate sense of timing and humour to his exchanges with his form tutor.

*"The other thing I noticed was Zack's ability to read situations quickly and to be able to enter a room and assess the mood of the occupants and then make decisions about whether to stay and become involved or whether to leave!!"*

*"Zack has not had an easy year with home situation, having lost his grandma of whom he was very fond. He has handled that well, talking through his worries and has as the year has progressed become confident in being with adults."*

*"I think he enjoys adult company!"*

*"How much of this is down to Robert's influence is hard to say...children can and do change a lot at this age. Zack always demonstrated skills which separated him from his peers – even when he "ran" with the naughty boys...I always felt he would find his way!! What Robert did was accelerate that journey ...help him find his way ..sooner rather than later...and in so doing maybe help him from being identified by staff as a problem. He has in a short time managed to convince staff that he is a sensible student with valuable opinions...it is not always easy to do that when you have been a "naughty".. Robert's intervention made this transition smooth. I think he became a facilitator between Zack and his form tutor and once Zack had that worked out he was able to move forward with comparative ease!"*

*"He has separated himself from many of his peer group – who might have been considered poor influences and has chosen to be his own person."*

*"He is now poised for a good GCSE and adult hood!!"*

Another student whom I worked with was Mark. He had been sent my direction from his English Teacher who was concerned that Mark not only lived with a challenging family situation but also did not appear to be enjoying anything in school, or life in general. I began work with him on a music project and it wasn't long before this opportunity allowed him to reinterpret his situation in a different light, at least at school. This in turn was picked up by his teachers. Here is my diary entry of Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> May: -

*On the way back to The Phoenix Centre, I met Mark's Maths teacher. She said that she now had a completely new relationship with Mark. The first time she noticed was when Mark came in and said, "excuse me, but I am working with Mr Jarvis". Apparently this was new in itself, as this is not Mark's usual way. Then, on subsequent times when Mark came in to be excused, Kathy took an interest, asking him what sort of work he was doing with me. When he said that he was doing some music, Kathy expressed support and told him that she would be interested to hear anything that he created. Kathy told me that from that moment Mark has been able to see her in a new light, i.e., not as just another disinterested adult (teacher) with no connection to the 'real' world as he experiences it. I said I found it slightly amusing as the first session I had with Mark I spent a fair bit of time doing Maths with him. Kathy went on to say that my work with Mark has allowed him a new way of appreciating the school. He now smiles, for example. He never did that before."*

The English teacher commented on my work with Mark and other students in this way: -

*"Robert is currently working with a number of students from my classes and it is a delight to see the excitement that he inspires. In particular, he gives many students,*

*who find difficulties with school, the chance to engage positively with people around them.”*

Mark summed up the situation in this way: -

*“I found it a lot funner to coming to school and that, cause I didn't really like coming to school”*

My main reason for introducing the ‘Robert-card’ though was not simply to make school more fun. I was interested in setting up a process through which the students could reinterpret their school environment and by doing so prove to the teaching staff that they should be taken seriously as custodians of their own time and learning. My stated aim (which I published in the school newsletter) was that it would “encourage responsibility for learning and management of time”. My hope was that participating students would “become role models for other pupils demonstrating that there are positive outcomes for taking responsibility for their own learning”.

As time went on the students felt an increased ownership of my workspace and so I encouraged them to take over the space. Consequently, they have been coordinating the bookings for the room and its general running since the last half of the summer term. Those that use it regard it as special and so they are careful about whom they introduce to it.

At the end of the school year I interviewed some of the students with whom I had worked and who had been owners of ‘Robert-card’s. I asked them about how being able to use the card had been for them and whether they had got anything out of it. I was astonished at their answers and how seriously they thought about their learning in general as well as how specific they were about their day-to-day education. What follows are a selection of their comments: -

The first thing that is clear is that the introduction of the ‘Robert-card’ has made a big difference to those students who participated in this project. It has not only transformed the way that they think about school but has also created a situation where they have been able to think seriously about their learning.

*“The introduction of the Robert-card has “made things easier, a lot easier. Like, say if you have a lesson off you have time to think about different things instead of go to that lesson to do work, go to next lesson do work, go to next lesson do work, then lunch and then go to next lesson do work. When you’re in a lesson all you think about is not getting in trouble and doing your work, and in Robert’s room it’s like chilling time really, so thinking about things that you are going to do later, what project you are working on, and stuff like that. It releases the pressure a bit.”*

[Zack - student]

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*“It’s made it more, fun, enjoyable. It’s just made it different and not so boring. It has given me more to think about than just doing boring work, and has allowed me to think of new ideas. It’s made me think of different ideas to do with what I normally do, and it’s changed my social life a lot more. It’s changed what I do. I didn’t used to normally do music programmes on computers and stuff but I do that for about an hour every day now, and it’s just made my social life a lot better.”*

[Toby - student]

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*"It's boring in lessons. It's simply like that. It's boring. In the other room it's more fun because you can like talk and have a laugh while your doing it, but if you talk and have a laugh in lessons you get sent out."*

[Daniel - student]

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*"I think I learn more if a class is fun because everybody takes an interest in it and they are not playing about."*

[

Seb - student]

Being able to use my workspace for personal projects has allowed the students to actually experiment with their learning as well as compare their experiences in and out of the class.

*"We go into a different world. It's like one door closes and another opens, and it's like you get to make your own decisions and stuff like that. It makes you think about more stuff carefully. In the classroom you have to listen and put your hand up to ask things and you're not allowed to shout out, but when we're in the room we just like give our ideas like, "I've got an idea!" and you're like "What?" and then you explain it, or "No! no!" and we have little debates whereas in class (maybe in citizenship you'll be allowed that) you're not allowed to shout out and express yourself.*

*"I think a lot of learning happens in there. We've learnt a lot more music than we have with our music teacher, because with our music teacher we just get set things but with you, you explain it, and then we start to explain it and we understand it more. We've learned how to run things, also like to be in charge, like you're in charge of people, and it's really good."*

[Daniel - student]

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*"We're learning kind of in our own way.... It's like yourself as a teacher and yourself as a student. "*

[Mark – student]

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*"I find teaching myself easier than being with a teacher, cause you can do it in your own head and you haven't got someone standing over you saying, 'Come on, hurry up, hurry up' and then you do get mistakes then because you're rushing with your work, and I think if you do things yourself that you learn more and also you remember it more."*

[Seb - student]

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*"You teach yourself. Because it's computers you can correct yourself easily. You learn as you go along. This room lets me learn in my own way, in my own time, by my*

own choices. [In the classroom] *it's like you are pressurised to know. It's like, 'this is boring – I already know this'.*

*"This enables me to do, I think, a lot more because I am thinking about what I want to learn. If I want to do something I do it; if I don't want to do something, I don't."*

[Josh - student]

Josh continues this comparison by giving his own analogy whereby the act of learning is like putting on a helmet: -

*"It's like you're given the helmet to put on yourself, or they put the helmet on for you. The helmet that's given to you is your own choice. You can leave it away or you can take it. That's natural learning and the other is forced learning.*

*"To be frank, my best learning ability, I think, is in here [the Robert-room]. I learn my best in here, because I learn naturally. As I said earlier, if you're given the helmet, you can choose to put it on, or put it down. In the classrooms, they smack the helmet on you and strap it with a padlock."*

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*"In the Cupboard it's a lot easier to learn because you're with your mates and maybe some of them will probably know more than you, or you'll know more than them, so they'll tell you something, you'll learn something or you tell them something and then they tell you something. In class it's just teacher learnt and sometimes the teacher doesn't explain it as well so it confuses you. It's like they'll say something and you won't get it and they'll try to make it a little easier but you still won't get it, but in the Robert-room you get it like that. [In the class] some people know how to do it obviously but some people won't, and so if you ask a friend, "how do you do that" and the teacher catches you and it's like, "what, don't talk, get down to work"; but you can't do any work because you don't know what the hell it is."*

[Zack - student]

In an interview with student Jacob he describes his project time as an opportunity that actually improves his experience back in the classroom afterwards.

*"It's just doing, and it's sort of stretching your mind by doing that; then, that helps you learn in other lessons".*

What is obvious is that by playing the 'Robert-card', he is able to go on a "creative" journey where the destination is unknown and has the advantage of "cleaning" his mind: -

*"Being creative and, say, using 'Audio Mulch' to knock something up quickly and then fiddle with it to see what this does and what that does and then just making music, or not-music – just noise, helps you to understand about what you want next in the song, or what does that sound like in real life. (Does it sound like a train on a train track? Does it sound like a car horn?). It's finding things that are to do with what you're doing but are completely unrelated like just going off on a tangent. So, it's sort of like daydreaming, but with a mouse. Or, it can be not with a mouse. You can just absentmindedly be drawing, just sort of doodling, and you're learning then, because*

*you are being creative because you're creating something, but it's also that you're thinking about what you're going to do next. You're thinking about how does this represent me as a person and so you're using your imagination and your creative brain to sort of ooze little bits of information through the conceptual mangle. It just sort of helps. I know this is a stupid example, but it's like defragmenting a computer because you're putting all the bits of your head, all the creative bits, and you're thinking "Oh, that looks like me – you're putting that up there" and sort of arranging everything and so it's in the right place and then you can work faster and there are lots of gaps so there's more room for information to get in but you can still use the things you've learned, that knowledge from all the bits you've collected. And so, in a way you are learning, it's doing it in a strange way round. You're teaching yourself, in fact".*

[Jacob - student]

Having the freedom to use the 'Robert-card' at any time means that the students feel that they are responsible for their learning. Despite teachers' concerns that students could use this privilege to simply get out of lessons, it is clear that, in fact, the students think very seriously, not only about their education but also how they will manage their learning: -

*"The 'Robert-card' has changed the way that I think about my lessons because I don't just not do lessons I don't like. I think in my head, I schedule it, either once a day or three times a week, through my mind. It has helped me because it means that if I am good and I want to get the next lesson off then my teacher would let me. If I'm terrible and horrible and mean then they won't let me have the lesson off. It makes my behaviour better. [For example] I don't get on really well with Geography but now I get on really well. (I never got on well last year with Geography either). I just crack on with my work, and then I work till I get it done and then use the Robert-card, 'cause I done like two lessons work in one lesson. It's not that I behave in a different way its more that I know that if I am good then I can do it although some teachers don't like you missing their lessons, not that I misbehave in the lessons that the teachers don't let you do, but It's made me think that maybe if I ask them one time they might let me, if I'm good."*

[Toby - student]

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*We get out of the boring lessons most of the time. We still do that lesson, like we do Maths four times a week, so if we miss it once a week it doesn't affect us that much. Mostly in Maths we just do the same sort of thing over a period of two or three lessons and it's like we don't really do much in the first lesson. If you work hard in the first two lessons then in the third one you've got more chance. You build up a trust with the teachers and then they know that you're not bunking and they don't put you down for truanting.*

[Daniel - student]

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*"We had a drama lesson not all that long ago where we had a supply teacher who was a drama teacher, but she couldn't teach drama and naturally everyone was messing around. Her tactic of controlling the class was to sit in the corner with her arms crossed looking cross and she expected that to work, but it didn't. She hardly said anything for the whole lesson and of course we didn't do any drama. So it's with*

*lessons like that (and that's a rare example, but things like that are happening on and on) that you just think that you might be able to learn something today but on the other hand I might not and maybe it's more likely that I won't judging by the teacher we have.*

*"Today, I was thinking, if we have our drama teacher who can actually teach drama (because I do quite like drama) then I might stay but if we have someone else and we're just going to watch a video or something, then I'll go. As it happens we were going to be watching 'The Simpsons' with Mr Barnes and that's not drama and so I used it [the Robert-card] to come here. And so it isn't just to do with what the lesson is and how it has been in the past but it's to do with the environment and using it creatively."*

[Jacob - student]

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*"Most lessons we can catch up on. Most lessons we don't do much anyway, the lessons that me and Dan get off because people mess around – in some departments, not all."*

[Zack - student]

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*"If I miss off English, I get all the back from it cause, like we do one lesson with that and we keep doing it, but I get all the information off the class"*

[Mark – student]

Connected with the students' serious attitude about their learning is a feeling of disenchantment with parts of their education. Here is a transcript of a conversation between two students – both at the end of their first year – talking about their problems with supply teachers. I'm sure; whenever I was a student, my conversation would have gone along the line of how great supply teachers were because one could muck about more. Not so with the students that I have listened to throughout my residency. I think, without exception, all the students that I have spoken with are far more mature than they are being given credit for. They are concerned and even angry about the quality of many aspects of their education: -

**Seb** [About classes] *"I feel as if I don't want to be there. I feel 'what am I doing here?' because at the moment in our class there are stupid people and I don't see the point because we're not even learning anything really because the teachers can't teach us. At the moment we have got so many supply teachers, it's amazing, because we have about two a day, and we have only just really started learning stuff because we have had, like in music: Mr V has been off for ages; German: Miss L has been off for ages; and then you've got drama: Mrs G has been off for ages; we've had different teachers for PE. On a Wednesday, last lesson, we've had about six different lessons, so it's like a month for one lesson where you just start learning a bit, and then you change. I'd rather come down here and actually learn stuff and do something instead of watching videos. The supply teachers is wasting your time. We could be doing something valuable. We could be doing something amazing really instead of sitting there and them giving you a picture to draw."*

**Mark** *"It's just something fun but you don't really get education out of it, and then you go to school for education and the teachers are off and all you do is like a crossword or something."*

**Seb** *"It might sound a bit educational but all you're doing is looking at the board."*

**Mark** *"We really learn more down here than with the supply teacher watching a video."*

**Seb** *"Sometimes you get the odd one, you get a good supply teacher which instead of giving you a crossword or watching a video they carry on teaching you but most of the time because we have supply teachers our classmates decide, 'Oh, they're a supply teacher, we can do what we want'."*

Throughout my residency at the school I have noticed that there is a mistrust amongst many of the staff regarding the students being able to take responsibility for their learning and to be able to learn by their own means. In some ways my residency has tried to counter this prejudice as it has tried to demonstrate that one can have a greater trust in the students. Sadly, there is still a long way to go. My hope is that this report will encourage those who read it to have the confidence to allow the students more choice in how they would like to learn.

Seb talked to me about wanting teachers to realise that *"we are actually doing something; we're not just playing about"*. Mark wants his teachers *"to realise that we are dedicated to it and to realise that we are not just here for fun"*.

Some students are able to deal with this more philosophically; others are (rightfully) angered:

*"Some teachers are quite annoyed when they keep seeing the 'Robert-card' but that's fine: they can say 'no', and that's the point of it."*

[Jacob - student]

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*"I got the feeling that she thought that I was trying to get out of lessons, and I've never bunked either. It's so unfair. It really bugs me, because I love this work. I just get the feeling that either she doesn't like me or.... I can't explain it. I'm just so pissed off. Because I love doing this, and ever since Jacob introduced me to you I been "Oh yes, this is something new". It's just been such fun. I don't know what the problem is now."*

[Josh – student]

Whatever the perceived views of the teachers', it is quite clear (at least to me) that the students have benefited a lot from this particular initiative, and in fact, are not making the big sacrifices that perhaps the teachers think they may be doing: -

*"In primary school when I was ill and had to have a day off school, when I came back it felt like I missed so much because there were lots of ongoing projects that we were doing (artwork, making masks, and things) and I had missed out on a stage of that, but here it doesn't seem to be changing as much, so rapidly, partly because there isn't so much time because you have to move in between lessons and go to different teachers and there seems to be more disruption because people don't know the teacher and things and so it feels like you don't get so much done, and so I've noticed that with the Robert-card, if you do miss a couple of lessons, it doesn't seem to matter when you come back. You don't seem to have missed anything much, and I don't know why that is but there's obviously something that's different."*

[Jacob - student]

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*"It's helped me concentrate a lot because I don't really find Maths easy and I tend to lose concentration and it's helped me to remember stuff, like I've got to concentrate with drums, and when I was with the band I had to concentrate on the bass, keep in the same rhythm and space and the drums.... I can remember like loads of things now. At the start when I wasn't doing really any work and I was finding it hard, but now I can really work stuff out."*

[Mark - student]

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*"I [now] think of one thing and I do actually now finish it and I think of another one, but before I used to think of one thing, do that for two minutes, and then just chuck it down the dustbin. I find it easier to concentrate now than I used to do."*

[Toby - student]

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*"What I mean by 'we're learning stuff' is: we learn stuff on the instruments, we learn stuff about life. It's not about having fun - well, it is about having fun, but it's also about making music.... It's taking us somewhere where we can enjoy and also we can learn and also we can get better at things."*

*"As you've left us here, we have taught ourselves and we have learnt different things. We've learnt things about people and how they act and that's good because, say, if you're going out with somebody, you sort of know what they're going to do and you know how they are going to act and react to something somebody says, so you get to know them better instead of sitting in the class and then listening to a teacher. I think the first thing you have to learn in life is about people really; you have to know how everything works before you even learn different languages and stuff like that."*

[Seb - student]

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*"I think school has got more like life. So you've got to do what you've got to do and then you can finish and totally do what you want to do instead of just mess around."*

[Zack - student]

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*"In drama, I think it's shown. Normally we'd be like, "yeah, that's a good idea." but now we're like "Actually, we could do this!" Like you speak up more in the lessons that you can. You feel like you can be more of a leader now. I feel like I am more of a leader than I was before."*

[Daniel - student]

It is my hope that the evidence accumulated from this and the other projects will go some way in encouraging the head teacher, the school's senior management team, and the rest of the teaching staff to realise that they are not the only ones in the school thinking about educational matters.

*"I don't know about you, but this is what I want to do with my life so at the moment I'm in a learning stage where I have to learn how to do a band and if I want to do a band in the future then I'll know how to do it."*

[Seb - student]

## THE FUTURE

*"In the ideal world (and I'm sure everyone would say this) I would just go to school and do lessons that I really liked, like dance, drama and IT and English and then for the rest of the time I'd be in the Cupboard doing Robertish things."*

[Jacob - student]

As far as the future is concerned, the school appears poised for change. Thanks to its recent upgrade to Specialist Arts Status, the school has adopted a new name and also the new logo, "Shaping The Future Through Creative Learning". This coming academic year, therefore, will be of great importance as the school sets the tone and style of learning for the future and demonstrates just how serious it is about living up to the message of its logo.

What is quite clear from the students that I have spoken with is that they appear to have their fingers much more on the pulse of the future of learning than any of the staff that I have spoken with (with the possible exception of the head teacher). The students recognise that learning works best when it is flexible, enjoyable and relevant to life.

Student Josh, for example, spoke to me about the ideal school where students could *"learn by themselves, like I do here [in the Robert-room]"*. His opinion was that if this was to happen then *"we would get a lot more done. It would be much better because you could work in your own time"*. Student Seb talks about an education that is *"fun and you actually learn something, and also it's got something to do with what we actually want to do with our lives."*

Of course, the members of the school teaching staff may well be the experts on the mechanics of teaching, but as far as actual learning is concerned my feeling is that the school would do well to listen seriously to what the students have to say and to be seen to take on board their suggestions.

From my discussions with the students, I have learnt that their ideas are radical, fresh and actually in tune with what is happening in various cutting-edge educational projects around the world - at least the ones that I am aware of. They see much of what goes on at the school in the name of education as inefficient, boring and even disabling. Nevertheless they have an energy for change, which in my experience has been unmatched by any member of staff (including the headteacher!) Not only that, but, as can be seen from above, they are also able to express these thoughts eloquently and with passion.

It is interesting, for example, that my most intelligent and profound discussions have not been with the teachers; they have been with my 'Robert-card' students. Why is this? How come the students know this stuff? The answer is surely that it's because it is them who are actually doing the learning. As young people, they naturally embrace our creative age. Their thoughts are not based on out-of-date philosophies but rather on their own-shared experiences, which they discuss with their peers. They are the future and they know this and are concerned. They can be trusted.