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## **An inside story: tracking experiences, challenges and successes in a joint specialist performing arts college**

Tansin Benn, Barry Benn and Brigitte Doyle

### **Abstract**

In England the government's specialist schools initiative is transforming the nature of secondary education. A three-year longitudinal case study tracked the effects of specialist performing arts college status on two schools. The sites were a mainstream school drawing pupils from an area of high social deprivation and disadvantage, and a special school catering for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, which were awarded joint performing arts college status. The government's preferred criterion for judging the success of specialist schools is improvement in whole-school examination results. The authors argue that this is a crude and inappropriate measure for these case study schools and probably others. Using questionnaires, interviews and documentation they tell an 'inside story' of experiences, challenges and achievements, from the perspectives of the schools' managers, staff and pupils. Alternative 'value-added' features emerged that were positive indicators of enrichment and success in both schools.

### **Introduction**

The authors challenge the political preference for measurement of specialist schools' success in England by examination results. They encourage recognition of other ways in which resources attached to specialist status can enrich the lives of all involved. A team of researchers was invited by the two schools in the case study to track effects of the first three years of their specialist Performing Arts College Status (PACS) designation from 2000 to 2003. The three researchers have many years' experience in schools, higher education and in teacher education. They also have specialist knowledge of dance in education. The two schools involved, one mainstream and one special school for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, became the first in England to receive Joint PACS, despite the schools' diverse missions and their campuses being three miles apart.

The research tracked the effects of PACS during the three-year period through collection of whole-school data alongside the perceptions of senior managers, staff and pupils. The purpose of focusing on perceptions of key stakeholders was to provide empirical evidence of the process of change encountered in the lives of those most closely affected by PACS. The research extends the debate on judgements of value beyond that of whole-school quantifiable indicators, such as examination results.

Whilst it is true that examination performance has improved generally in specialist schools (Yeomans et al., 2000), there is little understanding of why. The authors claim this is due to the increased financial support that follows specialist school status, which has enabled many improvements to be made in resources, new building and increased staffing levels. There is no conclusive research evidence that investment in one subject area, for example the

performing arts, could or should have any direct bearing on improving pupils' abilities in other subjects such as mathematics or English (Harland et al., 2000). Indeed, at the end of the three-year research at the case-study school there was inconclusive evidence of whole-school examination improvement, but was that indicative of failure? The authors suggest not, as they tell a deeper, richer inside story of the lessons learned, the achievements gained, the successes and challenges encountered in the lives of people in one joint specialist performing arts college.

### **Transformation of secondary education in England**

The specialist secondary schools initiative was introduced as part of a 'raising standards' government initiative that started in 1994.<sup>1</sup> It has led to one of the most influential changes in school identity, culture and ethos. Currently schools can apply for specialist college status in one of ten subjects and successful schools receive large amounts of funding in return for meeting targets on school improvement, community involvement and partnership ventures.<sup>2</sup> There are 1686 secondary schools that have specialist status with an expectation of 2000 by 2006 (DfES, 2004). One and a half million pupils are now educated in specialist schools from the age of 11. Successful schools receive a capital grant of £100,000 with recurrent funding for four years of £126 per pupil. Progress is reviewed annually against targets set and applications for redesignation are required after four years.

Government targets, definitions and range of subjects for which specialist college status could be designated have evolved as they became more firmly embedded in the government vision for a secondary (11–16 years) school system (Yeomans et al., 2000; DfES, 2001). A much stronger 'community brief' emerged after the new Labour government took over the scheme in 1997. Remits expanded to include collective community responsibility to benefit other schools, even in budget terms. The 2001 White Paper, *Schools Achieving Success* (DfES, 2001, p. 38), suggested specialist schools should be 'spreading excellence, sharing success', and this collaborative remit became an increasing part of the process of scrutiny by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education-government body responsible for inspection and regulation of schools in England) from 2001. The growing power base of specialist schools became part of the wider transformation of education:

This reflected the vision of and for specialist schools, as 'hubs' of 'excellence', the central reference point of transformed local education networks, the wider transformation of education, and the teaching profession, and the 'raising of standards' throughout education. (Penney et al., 2002, p. 2)

### **Measuring success**

Despite the growing expectations and functions of specialist schools, a review of the literature focusing on specialist schools demonstrates that judgements of value and quality remain predominantly based on GCSE examination results, for example in comparing results from specialist and non-specialist secondary schools (Lesson & Taylor, 2000, 2001; Ofsted, 2001; Schagen et al., 2002). Others have criticised such research, for example Goldstein (2001), for relying on school-level rather than pupil-level data. Gorard and Taylor (2001) criticised such approaches, calling for more refinement that would capture some of the complexities, for example between the subjects or between cohorts, local influences and impact, and differences between school-types: 'simple pronouncements about the relative cost benefits of specialist schools, not based on such analytical complexity, are unlikely to be of

much value (except perhaps politically)' (Penney et al., 2002, p. 379).

Whilst Levacic and Jenkins (2004) addressed these 'complexities' with an in-depth analysis of government data, the focus remained on quantifiable academic achievement. The latest Ofsted report on specialist schools (Ofsted, 2005), in the section headed 'Pupils' Achievement', gives a comprehensive breakdown of GCSE/GNVQ results.<sup>3</sup>

Penney, Houlihan and Eley (2002) criticised the narrowness of many commentaries to date on the success of specialist schools: 'There has been a relative absence of research engaging with the full breadth of the expectations surrounding specialist status' (p. 2). That breadth is indicated through wide-ranging aims that include: raising standards of achievement across the curriculum; improving teaching and learning; extending enrichment opportunities through specialist subjects, e.g. through links with outside organisations; encouraging increased take-up of the specialist subject; collaborating with partner schools in sharing facilities, resources, good practice; and providing high-quality learning opportunities through specialist subjects for people in the wider local community (Ofsted, 2001). Examination results are a crude and unproved indicator in the face of such expectations. As Harland et al. (2000) recounted, there are many more benefits, and indeed accounts from pupils themselves show arts-based learning that had transferred to other subjects and contexts beyond school. More importantly, the report found that there were many features of arts education that intrinsically enhanced the lives of schools and their pupils. These included: enjoyment in learning; increased self-esteem; knowledge and skills; social and cultural awareness; creativity and thinking skills; enrichment of communication and expressive skills; advances in personal and social development; and institutional effects on the culture of the school and on the local community.

Qualitative studies of specialist schools have identified features of good practice. For example, on the basis of ten schools, Tooley and Howes (1999) identified 'seven habits of highly successful schools'. These were: focus on school ethos, strong leadership and management, focus on students' learning, innovation to promote school goals, quality control, organisation and structure in empathy with ethos, parental and community links. This work was supported by Gillmon (2001) who also identified the importance of monitoring, target-setting and meeting individual pupils' needs, improving literacy skills, longer days, and Saturday and holiday provision. Schagen et al. (2002) also raised the point that similar factors emerged from research into characteristics of effective (non-specialist status) schools identified by Sammons et al. (1998). So it is problematic to attribute simple causal links to specialist school status. High attainment in subjects seemed to be related to a conducive learning environment, high expectations and concentration on teaching (Schagen & Weston, 1998). Where these factors co-existed, Ofsted (2001) found success in subjects was similar in specialist and non-specialist schools. Generally specialist schools are improving in terms of examination results, subject opportunities provided, organisation and management (Yeomans et al., 2000). But there remain questions about causality, the emphasis on 'extrinsic claims' and relations with developments in nonspecialist schools. Such issues led to the more 'pupil-centred', insider case-study approach to the ensuing research.

### **Case study context**

Although the case study was of one joint specialist performing arts college, it comprised two schools, differentially positioned, most significantly one mainstream and one special school,

in a large city in central England. Diversity is indicated in Table 1 in terms of, for example, numbers of staff and pupils. Similarity is indicated in terms of ethnicity, gender bias and high levels of social deprivation and disadvantage. In addition, at the outset, the status of the arts in both schools was very different. The special school had an established high reputation for work in the area and the mainstream school had no previous arts identity.

Table 1. A brief comparison of the schools' profiles

School 1 — special school	School 2 — mainstream school
67 special needs pupils	600 mainstream pupils
11 — 19 age range	11 — 16 age range
9 teaching staff and 19 assistants	41 teaching staff and 9 assistants
70% boys	75% boys
40% Free school meals*	46% Free school meals
30% Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin (Largest ethnic group)	30% Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin (Largest ethnic group, also large number of Afro-Caribbean pupils)

\*Free school meals are provided for pupils from families in which the family income falls below a specified low level. The proportion of pupils receiving free school meals in a school is frequently used in England as the main indicator of the relative poverty of the community served by the school.

### Research method

The overall aim of the research was to track the effects of gaining specialist PACS over the first three years of designation. To enable both macro and micro effects to be evidenced, five sub-questions were negotiated between researchers and head teachers.

The questions were addressed through data collections towards the end of each academic year, using methods indicated below:

*1. How did pupils' perceptions of school, learning and the arts change?*

In the mainstream school questionnaires were distributed to one randomly selected class of 30 pupils in each of Years 7, 9 and 11 (90 questionnaires per year, administered during lesson time, ensuring 100% return). Five group interviews with four or five randomly selected pupils were conducted in each of Years 7, 9 and 11 (15 interviews per year).

For the special school the profound and multiple learning difficulties of the pupils led to alternative strategies. Three mini case studies of individuals were conducted each year (nine in total) through interviews with parents and class teachers most closely involved with each individual. It was considered that parents would notice behavioural changes and recall significant comments made by their children. This proved to be the case. Parents were happy to discuss their children's progress and reaction to arts activities, in particular those undertaken as joint projects with pupils from the mainstream school. With only seven pupils in each class, the teachers developed a close understanding of the needs and responses of their individual pupils and were willing to share this knowledge for the purpose of the research. In addition, a group interview with eight to ten pupils on the school council, facilitated by the head of school, was conducted each year.

*2. What are the perceptions of senior management staff on the effects of becoming a performing arts college?*

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted annually with the two head teachers and the heads of the respective performing arts departments.

*3. What are the perceptions of arts and non-arts staff in the schools on the effects of becoming*

*a performing arts college?*

Questionnaires were distributed annually to 78 staff, including classroom assistants, with an average response rate of 80%.

*4. What evidence is there for a rise in standards from external evaluations?*

GCSE examination results in arts subjects, mathematics, English and science were tracked in the mainstream school. The pupils in the special school did not undertake external examinations. Documents from other external evaluators, for example Ofsted and Arts Council for England, were reviewed.

*5. What other evidence exists to enable monitoring of effects and outcomes, e.g. transferability of 'value added' - related to the gaining of PACS?*

Wider documentation was collected including: minutes of meetings, project portfolios, the nine mini case studies of special needs pupils, and observation of events (The same questionnaires and interview structures were used in all cases early year.)

Whole-school data on examination results and attendance figures were reviewed for any indicators of change. Questionnaires were systematically analysed for pattern of consensus, contradiction and change across the three years. Interviews were transcribed and scrutinised for emergent themes and cross-referenced with other data sources. Field notes from analysis of documentation and attendance at events were used to inform the emergent evaluation of the effects of gaining PACS.

## **Analysis**

Measuring whole-school trends

The research challenge of this particular case study, involving two such different schools achieving joint status, is immediately revealed in the different treatment needed for quantitative data sources. For example, in the mainstream school attendance figures improved, with unauthorised absence rates halving over the research period, supporting the notion of a more attractive learning environment by 2003 (see Table 2). Such figures cannot be tracked in the special school as their intake was highly restricted (around seven a year), and dependent on need. Reasons for absence for example for medical reasons or lack of transportation, would be radically different to those of pupils in the mainstream school. Measurement by external public examination progress was also not an option for pupils in the special school.

Table 2. Percentage of student-day absences

	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-
Authorised absence	12.9%	10.5%	9.1%	8.8%
Unauthorised absence	1.8%	1.8%	1.7%	0.9%
Total absences	14.7%	12.3%	10.8%	9.7%

The GCSE results of the mainstream school in the arts subjects, mathematics, English and science are shown in Table 3 for the three years prior to gaining specialist status and for the first three years as a specialist college. The Table indicates the number of pupils entered and mean grade achieved. The mean grade was calculated after assigning numerical values to the grades achieved, i.e. A\* = 7, A = 6, B = 5, etc.

Table 3. Number of examination entries and mean grades attained

	Maths		Science		English	
	No. of entries	Mean grade	No. of entries	Mean grade	No. of entries	Mean grade
1998	80	3.01	76	3.72	73	4.01
1999	101	3.26	215	3.75	101	4.89
2000	92	3.15	189	3.66	86	4.21
2001	87	3.14	273	2.17	85	4.41
2002	91	3.43	164	4.63	87	4.70
2003	99	3.11	202	3.89	197	4.16

  

	Art		Drama		Music	
	No. of entries	Mean grade	No. of entries	Mean grade	No. of entries	Mean grade
1998	13	4.3	20	3.65	32	2.73
1999	19	4.58	55	4.96	17	3.88
2000	32	4.19	47	5.38	22	4
2001	13	4.62	33	5.48	26	3.69
2002	34	3.29	49	5.33	29	4.07
2003	28	4.04	53	3.81	27	3.78

In 2003 GCSE in Dance was offered for the first time:

No. of entries: Total 16

Mean grade: 3.0

An examination of the table of results in all subjects indicates no clear trends in terms of the number of pupils entered or in results achieved. What does this mean? Should it signify failure and jeopardise redesignation as a specialist college? The authors believe the voices of senior managers, staff and pupils offer a more meaningful account of the effects of gaining PACS on the schools involved and a more accurate representation of the challenges, opportunities and successes experienced.

### **The 'inside story'**

The successes and challenges of the early years of joint PACS are shared through the experiences and perceptions of the senior managers (head teachers and heads of performing arts departments), the staff, and the pupils and their parents.

#### *1. Perceptions of senior managers*

The development of successful joint PACS required constant commitment, leadership, vision, perseverance, creative problem-solving, critical reflection and imagination from senior managers, who were the two head teachers and heads of performing arts. The outcome was the achievement of a firm specialist school identity amongst staff, students, parents and the wider community. After three years there was an ethos of pride in that success but without complacency.

Personal reflections from senior managers at the end of the research sum up the passion for

the arts common to all those who steered the first three years of joint PACS. The process had been long and required stability of leadership and sustained effort from the fund-raising, bid-writing stages that went before, through the implementation of plans on different sites and striving towards co-location at the end of this research in 2003. The statements came in response to the question 'What have you valued most in the process of establishing the PACS over the last three years?'

It has been an extension of my own core beliefs about education and the arts as an integral part of the process of connecting people. I have always had a commitment to the arts and for what the arts can offer children. (HTS2)<sup>4</sup>

Seeing young people develop and become confident, people you would never have thought capable—producing the most amazing performances, group work and peer support. Those are the real values. (HPAS1)

Given the energy required to make this project work in the early years of specialist school status, perhaps it is not surprising that both head teachers took early retirement in 2004 as the time for lengthy application for redesignation approached.

The management of underpinning systems, such as finance, improved, and early mistakes in cancelling senior management meetings because of other pressures were rectified. Such meetings were prioritised to ensure communication and shared direction was maintained to 'steer' developments. Early overwhelming enthusiasm and opportunity led to some distractions from targets and key focus areas. The joint management meetings proved vital to improving success.

Curriculum timetabling for performing arts ventures and overburdened staff was problematic throughout. Coping with the negativity of colleagues, if pupils were extracted from lessons for special events or productions, demanded constant attention. This was exacerbated by the cross-site travelling demands in any shared enterprise. The heads of performing arts were most affected as they were the front-line targets for colleagues' complaints:

We (arts staff) have almost become a peg for people to hang their frustrations on, whether its an arts problem or not. (HPAS1)

Although blocking time for performing arts work did succeed, much energy necessarily overlapped into after-school, weekend and holiday time to minimise the impact of other colleagues and subjects, as well as extending opportunities for some pupils.

The tension of managing the extras that came with specialist school state increased over the three years as wider reputations, community demands, new move and incentives such as Creative Partnerships brought more demands on the same heavily overworked staff.<sup>5</sup> Job descriptions and expectations were in danger of becoming impossibly demanding and needed rationalising to ensure staff stability. Indeed, there were times when the extra demands were in danger of obscuring attention to curriculum innovation and development within each school:

It's all on top of the day job. (HPAS2)

Alongside the personal achievements and success experienced by the senior managers, personal costs need to be recognised:



My job is too big I think. I can't be head of dance, performing arts, be in charge of the new bid, teach a full timetable, run all the GCSE dance on my own, run the clubs and do the community work. (HPAS1)

Continuity of staffing was an issue. In the mainstream school there were gains and losses when the head of performing arts was promoted to senior management. There was instability in arts staffing as drama, dance and music staff changed. Momentum was lost and important development time taken out of the following year, as well-established relationships and working patterns had to be renewed. The damage to continuity and progress was recognised by colleagues:

It's like starting again, we have learned how to work together, we were thinking the same way which saves so much time and now you have to start all over again to build that relationship, to find out about each other and ways in which you can collaborate. (HPAS2)

Lessons about planning for future continuity were learned quickly. Another tension for some senior colleagues was perceived inequality in the growth of PACS. The mainstream school appeared to gain significantly more than the special school, not only in the inevitable imbalance in facility development because of the proposed relocation of the special school to share a campus with the mainstream school in 2003, but also in terms of 'public consciousness'. Efforts were made to redress the publicity and presentation of PACS to the 'outside world' but elements of 'jointness' remained problematic:

'Jointness'—there is a lot of work to do there. It has been unwieldy, particularly with the distance between the schools. Such a lot has to go into 'jointness'—that's what we are looking forward to in our next move. (HTS2)

Head teachers were aware of different interpretations of the meaning of 'joint status', resulting in different expectations. For staff in the schools it was important to develop 'jointness' in a way that celebrated and pushed boundaries of distinctiveness as well as seeking ways of working together. One area of high expectation from both inside and outside the school was improving inclusion. This proved one of the greatest successes through the cross-school in-service training and production work that focused on sharing ideas and best practice in the field:

I now have a better understanding of 'inclusion' and my teaching has benefited from better differentiation. (NASSI)

The special school] has an excellent reputation for teaching. They are a successful school with a united staff. It can only be of benefit to us to work with them. (HPAS1)

One example was a linked project for the schools. This involved teachers, pupils, artists from a local professional ballet company and a television-sponsored live video link for the shared performance with a dance in the community project in Atlanta, USA. The event was not only a technological first for the city but a process and product of quality in the area of inclusive practice. It would not have been dreamt of before the vision that PACS brought. Speaking afterwards, both head teachers were amazed at what had been achieved in the same event by

so many students, of all ages and abilities, from such diverse backgrounds, and across the world.

The standard of work was so high ... no-one was looking for who was from which school, it was a truly integrated project which has exceeded all expectations. (HTS1)

## *2. Perceptions of staff*

Early resistance to PACS was most noticeable in the mainstream school. Some staff were concerned about the whole-school commitment to an arts identity that would inevitably impact on their own subject. Despite offers to become engaged in various ways, there was a feeling of being distanced from developments. Staff saw 'imbalance' in curriculum attention and lack of communication as indicated in this quotation:

We are now a two-part school—those who have and those who struggle on regardless. Performing arts seem to be able to do whatever they want such as taking students away from timetabled lessons for arts activities. (NASS1)

Over the three years there was a very considerable diminution in staff resistance as the school built its new identity. Some staff left, others were appointed. Opportunities were taken to enhance learning by linking arts to other subjects as a way of sharing the benefits of resources in performing arts more widely. For example, a humanities project named 'Brazil' used the arts and associated funding to enhance student learning in new ways. Other colleagues took on roles with arts enterprises such as helping in performance. Wider engagement in arts activities led to a more supportive whole-school ethos:

Embedding an ethos also means engagement and involvement of the wider school community. A large number of staff have volunteered to become involved in the school production. (ASS 1)

Performing arts staff give updates of information, visitors and performances within the college. It does not feel an outside department. (NASS I)

Staff became increasingly aware of the benefits to the reputation and standing of the school in the local and wider community as a consequence of the quality of the performing arts work demonstrated by pupils inside and outside the school environment:

There have been some superb school productions, which have raised the profile of the school. (NASS 1)

[PACs] has provided a focal point for excellence and it has lent itself well to an inclusive approach where all have an opportunity to excel. (NASS1)

In the special school the staff were already convinced of the value of the arts in the education of their pupils and continued to build on the excellent reputation gained for arts work in the city prior to 2000. There was total commitment to PACS. The whole issue of communication and negotiation was easier because staff numbers and school size were much smaller than in the mainstream school. Gains were made in further developing expertise for staff and opportunities for pupils.

The arts permeated the school in new ways. Arts practices led to extending opportunities for creativity, originality, the continual pushing of boundaries across the curriculum and the addressing of national issues such as assessment and qualifications for young people with special needs.

Another area of progress across the three-year research was seen in the area of evidencing 'value added'. The employment of information and communications technology (ICT), made a difference to the quality of the collated evidence. Ideas were shared and developed across the schools. CD-ROM and PowerPoint presentations were made and a survey of the material gathered highlighted and confirmed the richness and diversity of the performing arts experiences that pupils at both schools received, as well as the depth of learning that occurred. The schools began to move beyond the preservation of material for posterity to exploiting its usage. The provision of evidence for individual profiling, tracking and monitoring of success was an attempt to capture the essence of achievement at all levels in and through the arts.

A further major achievement, highly profiled in the special school, was in the skilling of non-arts colleagues in the arts. The smaller environment, different pupil/adult ratios and cross-curricular organisation all contributed to enabling this. Consequently, levels of competence and confidence amongst staff in the arts increased and they were able to exceed boundaries that would not have been possible without the resources and opportunities that came with PACS.

With all the new ideas and different ways of working I feel much more confident in my teaching. (NASS2)

The biggest problems for arts staff were unexpected. As specialist staff, engaged fully with their 'new roles' in a joint performing arts college, the expectations of others rose. The arts specialists received constant requests to act as advisors, as consultants and ambassadors for the arts, as co-authors in national texts and as leaders of complex multi-agency projects. They were becoming a new breed of professionals and they could not find training to match their needs. Finding their own ways to break new ground was the only option:

Training is difficult for us. You can't find good training easily when you're leading in the field ... feedback (from courses attended) is often 'we were there a few years ago' in-house and joint training is working. (HPAS2)

The pressures increased each year as horizons broadened. Managing growing partnerships and networks demanded more and more time from the specialist performing arts staff. However, the rewards of the staff were high in terms of funding availability, support for extending their subjects, growing pupil involvement and success in arts activities. As the quality of the pupils' work became more widely recognised, appreciation for the efforts and contribution of staff followed. This was itself highly motivating, as suggested in the following comment by an arts staff colleague:

Nothing is more motivating than success. At the close of a marvellous production when parents, staff and pupils voice their appreciation you find yourself saying 'bring on the next one' before realising what that means in terms of extra work and

commitment. (ASS 1)

The arts staff became particularly skilled at working with artists in education. New money that came with specialist status and encouragement through projects like Creative Partnerships ensured links with increasing numbers of professional artists:

Somehow we have to strike a balance between flooding the kids with too much so there's no sense of privilege and getting them to recognise what a golden opportunity it is for them. (ASS2)

One of the challenges of such opportunities was embedding projects into pupils' learning and curriculum planning so they were not just seen as 'fun' one-off adventures. The roll-on implication was the need for teachers to engage with artists at a deeper level to ensure they understood how each project needed to match the longer-term needs of the pupils and the school. The special school was already ahead of most schools on the interface of artists and teachers. Specialist school status brought many more opportunities to continue refining this practice and to spread the skills more widely:

We have staff this year—very confident with the artists and able to negotiate a package and help define outcomes ... Years ago an artist or group could come in and we'd think they know best. We no longer think they know best but we wholeheartedly applaud, admire and crave their talent. But we enter into that with a different attitude—what is important is the outcome for the kids so ... 'can we talk to you about the kids and our aspirations for the project?' As we become better at being partners in the enterprise we become stronger critics as well, it's evaluation for the right motives—to grow—this really worked for us because it's seeing yourself as a partner as opposed to a recipient—that is the difference. (HPAS2)

During the three-year research period, not only were the teachers negotiating individual learning outcomes for pupils with artists prior to projects, but also requiring whole-day evaluations with the artists to follow up and develop the work created. The networking required of staff in specialist colleges enabled these skills to reach more teachers and artists as school/professional links became a mainstay for the schools:

I have learned such a lot from working alongside visiting artists. (NASS2)

### *3. Perceptions of pupils and parents*

Pupil enrichment, and increases in self-esteem and confidence in and through the arts, both within and beyond the curriculum, were evident in the range of questionnaires, interviews, case studies and observations pursued between 2000 and 2003:

It helps you believe in yourself. (PS1)

It helps you get up and talk. (PS2)

It energises you for other lessons. (PS1)

The teachers trust you to use the practice rooms—it's a privilege. (PS 1) We help those from [the mainstream school] to get it right. (PS2) Drama helps you with everyday situations. (PS2)

You can share things and be proud. (PSI)

Success of PACS was perceived in different ways by the pupils. For the younger pupils 'having fun' and 'enjoying their work' (Year 7 PS 1) was important both in and outside the curriculum along with 'rising to the challenges' set by the arts:

It's hard but it's good. (Year 7 PSI)

Older pupils were able to measure the success of specialist status through a perceived rise in standards in the arts (especially in performance work) and through what they saw as an improved reputation and image of their school.

It makes it a special school. (Year 9 PSI)

It makes it different—it stands out. (Year 11 PS 1)

Our new uniform is really cool. We designed it ourselves. (Year 9 PS 1)

By the end of Year 9, pupils were much more articulate about the benefits of being in a performing arts college and about things that made learning in the arts fun. These included: 'greater challenges' and 'more risk taking' in their lessons, 'more opportunities to perform', 'trips out of school', 'more work with artists' and 'more variety of clubs'. Year 9 pupils (School 1) articulated awareness of reactions in the local community:

The community takes more notice of [the school] now. The community can see we have talent.

Other arts groups from outside school can use our facilities now. Some of the groups are really good.

Club, weekend and holiday projects expanded in both schools and gradually some pubs and inclusive projects were set up to pursue the element of 'jointness' in new ways. These involved a small number of pupils and it was clear that the link between the mainstream and special schools, on geographically separated campuses, had not permeated the consciousness of all pupils:

Those [pupils] who have worked with [the special school] children have got really involved. Some have volunteered to be mentors and are doing an amazing job. Unfortunately not enough value the experience. (ASS 1)

It's a pity that more of our students have not taken the opportunity to take part in joint events. Those that do, clearly gain in maturity and a sense of responsibility. Perhaps more N-611 benefit when we occupy the same campus. (HPAS I)

Pupils in both schools and parents interviewed in the special school pupil case studies, became more articulate about learning processes and outcomes in the arts. Comments such as 'increased concentration', 'focus', 'team work', 'being empowered', 'greater involvement in creative and original processes' demonstrated this. Many accolades were related to the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of participation in arts-based learning. Recognition of the importance of transferable skills from engagement with the arts was more highly valued by

the pupils and parents at the special school. This could be attributed to the longer commitment to a central place for the arts in the school. Some of the children with special needs did mention joint projects and their parents were aware of these and of their value. Typical comments made by parents when interviewed were:

David often talks about his friend [mentor]. I think he takes more notice of him than us. Since he was in the last production he has joined the club. His concentration has improved enormously and he isn't so 'babyish'. (PPS2)

The identification of subject-specific skills became more evident in the final year of the research. Pupils from both schools readily identified the affective nature of dance, drama and music and associated this with the sense of enjoyment, excitement and emotional involvement. Getting a 'real buzz' (Year 9 pupil) from a dance or drama class remained one of the top reasons for enjoyment. Pupils were able to articulate what gave them pleasure in arts lessons, such as listening to and composing music, the physical nature of dance and role-play in drama. The ethos of arts practice in both schools was to engage pupils in as much of the creative process as possible, from start to finish, rather than picking 'off-the-shelf' projects. This meant a variety of experiences, from writing scripts and music to designing sets, in addition to the skills of performance. In 2003 students in the mainstream school produced a show with minimal guidance from staff. The students conceived the idea, wrote the script, composed the music and organised rehearsals. The show was a great success and the level of pride and sense of achievement evident when they spoke about it was almost tangible:

We were trusted to be so professional, to create the whole project from beginning to end, the teachers were there if we needed them and to encourage and support our ideas. We learned so much and now know we could do it all again. The audience really liked our work, which made it all worthwhile. (PS 1)

The pupils valued the breadth of skills and vision this gave them and the responsibility it bestowed.

The power of performance must not be underestimated. Performing raised levels of motivation and standards of achievement. The request from pupils for more opportunities to perform was registered early on in the reporting cycle. By 2003 the range of performance opportunities available had contributed to a rise in the pupils' confidence and skill levels. In the mainstream school regular performances became an integral part of the life of the school. At the end of each term the whole school gathered for an afternoon during which groups shared their work. The level of appreciation and support was high and from the start the visibility of student achievement impressed fellow students and staff alike. There were also frequent performances given at school assemblies:

Sharing performance work has become a warm, supportive occasion. (ASS 1)

I do consider it to be significant—it's all about school ethos. I am even getting positive reactions from those staff who, in the past, have never offered warm comment ... such (events) are significant in changing staff perceptions. (HPASI)

Many of the responses in interviews and questionnaires indicated that being involved in

performance, both in school and outside, was one of the keys to improved feelings of self-worth:

It's good to go to other schools and show what we can do. (Year 9PS1)

Our last show was great. We had to do an extra night because so many people wanted to see it. (Year 9 PSI)

Performances outside school increased in number as reputations grew more widespread. For example, pupils and staff were invited to participate in an international arts festival in Germany. A large group of students from the mainstream school appeared for several weeks as performers on a weekly children's television programme. These and other events were important in raising the profile of the schools with the parents and the local and international communities.

### **Conclusions**

If we were to use the government's preferred measure of success, a rise in achievement levels in GCSE/GNVQ examinations, then results for the mainstream school would be inconclusive. There were an increased number of pupils taking GCSEs, and additional opportunities in the arts, but no trends of increased success emerged. The examination was never appropriate or relevant for the students with severe learning difficulties in the special school. The systematic collection of data, using a multi-method approach over three years, enabled a richer picture of successes, challenges and changes to emerge. The 'inside story' will be of interest to other schools, their managers, teachers and pupils, as the specialist school model transforms secondary education in England.

Both the mainstream and special schools adopted the mantle of specialist status with energy and commitment, realising many of the wider expectations of such institutions (Ofsted, 2001; Penney et al., 2002). The intrinsic qualities of the arts in education identified by Harland et al. (2000) were all evidenced in the research. The range and diversity of opportunities in the performing arts available to all pupils increased enormously. The benefits for pupils in terms of self-esteem, enrichment, cultural awareness and enjoyment of the arts were made possible through opportunities brought about by specialist college status such as increased facilities and revenue funding, raised expectations of networking, community engagement and linking with the professional arts world. Joint productions and events benefited both mainstream and special school students and staff and made inclusion a two-way process and one of the major successes. After three years the benefits were visible in the schools' ambience, vibrancy and wall displays, the improvement of facilities, additional resources, staffing and established identity that was shared between staff, pupils, parents and community. The Artsmark Gold Award was achieved, for good practice.<sup>6</sup> Positive responses about arts practices came from other external sources of scrutiny, such as Ofsted. The performing arts provided a particularly visible route to establishing, reinforcing and consolidating the new identity with well-publicised and attended events through which developing skills, confidence and competence were regularly displayed. Other government initiatives, such as 'Gifted and Talented' and 'Creative Partnerships' to enhance arts education, creativity and the potential of children, were imaginatively integrated into specialist college planning, maximising the provision of additional government funding.<sup>7</sup> For example, the government-funded 'Creative Partnerships' initiative impacted on the case-study schools at an opportune moment as they moved into

their third year of specialist status knowing they had to improve 'community targets' by networking with more local schools. The scheme was piloted in the city, the project requiring clusters of local schools to work collaboratively. The specialist schools system provided a ready-made network of partner community schools. The overlaying of additional government finance was used to expand and enhance the school's PACS and community role, satisfying government targets on both fronts.

The special school had established an outstanding reputation for arts practice in the city before gaining specialist school status in 2000. The new venture enabled staff and pupils to further their endeavour to place the arts at the centre of the curriculum, to pursue cutting-edge work on identifying progress at every level of the achievement scale and to provide opportunities, awards and qualifications which were appropriate to their pupils. They also gave generously of their newly acquired knowledge and expertise. joint in-service training enabled staff from the mainstream and wider community of schools, as well as local artists, to improve their knowledge of working with pupils with special needs. The school was able to cascade expertise through new networks and the reciprocity led to many interesting inclusive projects and increasingly productive learning and teaching exchanges.

The changes in the mainstream school were most visible as they adopted a new identity and pushed through early stages of resistance to realise a whole-school commitment to PACS. Because the special school was to co-locate on their campus in December 2003, much of the facilities investment that came with specialist school status went into the mainstream site. It was unfortunate then, that within a year of co-locating, as their redesignation bid began in 2004, the government decided not to recognise joint specialist colleges any longer, despite a joint deputation from the case-study schools to the DfES. This was symptomatic of government short-term policies and ironic after three difficult years when these schools were on the brink of realising their aspirations for further co-ordinated development on a shared site. Perhaps part of the problems relating to joint status lay in different interpretations of meaning. Some outsiders interpreted 'joint' as 'merger', whilst both schools wanted to retain their separate identity even after co-location, to 'maximise collaboration but respect and celebrate difference' (HTS2).

The other major tensions were around the pressures felt by the arts staff as the schools assumed the status of a performing arts college. With no additional training their roles widened considerably. As Penney, Houlihan and Eley (2002) identified, the policy shift was towards making specialist schools 'hubs' to work with local schools and agencies, to enter into initial and continuing teacher training, to adopt the 'school improvement' roles and responsibilities from positions of leadership. The schools were not selected in the first place because of their outstanding potential in this direction. Consequently, staff found themselves immediately cast as 'experts'. They learnt by experience and managed these new roles as effectively as possible but there was no preparation or training that met their needs for such a transition and this was a constant source of criticism from them. Shifting goal posts was unhelpful. The increased expectations for their community role, and management of growing networks, made excessive demands on the head teachers and arts staff. These were problematic throughout the first three years.

Much of the drive and success of the joint PACS was attributable to the vision, commitment, perseverance and stability of the senior managers, head teachers and heads of performing arts



departments. Achievements need to be celebrated but costs recognised. In many senses senior managers were victims of their own success, a success that constantly spiralled upward requiring creative, problem-solving management skills. The major beneficiaries have been the children, with exciting adventures in the arts, which were undreamed of before funding and networking made them possible. The staff, because of the efforts demanded, have also developed and grown in ways that were unforeseen in 2000. The habits of successful schools (Tooley & Howes, 1999) were evidenced in the case-study schools, in particular the management focus on school ethos. Factors such as managing longer days and holiday provision mirrored research of Gillmon (2001). However, because of the case-study nature of this research there remain unanswered questions such as the similarities and differences that may or may not exist between specialist schools and good non-specialist schools. The evidence of difference attainable from the financial incentives and rewards that came with specialist school status remains tangible and undeniable. The successes experienced here are amplified in the gender and ethnicity debate when revisiting the predominantly male, Muslim context of the pupil population. That a GCSE in dance was introduced at all is worthy of celebration, given the complexity of issues surrounding gender, ethnicity, religion and the performing arts (Benn, 2005).

### **Professional challenges and future research**

The 'inside story' recounted here highlights professional challenges to meet the unforeseen outcomes of the transformation of schooling led by the specialist schools model. Future research needs to address concerns arising from this research, many of which mirror those emerging from Penney, Houlihan and Eley's (2002) first national survey of specialist sports colleges:

- Staffing demands can be onerous and a new type of professional is emerging, for example much time and energy is required to sustain and develop partnerships and networks essential to specialist college status. How are the emergent roles of specialist staff being recognised and managed? How are initial teacher training and continuing professional development systems responding?
- Momentum is gathered fast once specialist status is awarded and succession planning is essential for key specialist posts to avoid setbacks and breaks in continuity. How can this be managed effectively?
- GCSE results would have been a poor indicator of the success witnessed over three years in this case study. How can the breadth and depth of contribution made possible through specialist college status be recorded, compared and evaluated more effectively?
- How do specialist schools manage the plethora of overlapping government initiatives that impact directly on their targets for maintaining specialist status and therefore higher levels of funding?
- What is the impact of an unsuccessful bid for redesignation when the whole impetus of a specialist school's structure and activity has been broadened with generous accompanying funding during the previous three- or four-year period?
- Staff in specialist performing arts colleges have prolific opportunities for extending evening, weekend and holiday programmes and constant links with arts professionals. How are these developments best linked to both curriculum enhancement and the potential for young people to gain qualifications?
- The major catalyst for school improvement in this case study has been the increased funding to improve the 'effective schools' factors, such as learning environment and

extended opportunities. Since some English secondary schools are designated specialist and others are not, a two-tiered inequitable system is probable. What is the impact of this on staff, pupils, funding and opportunity, in non-designated schools? How is the gap between specialist and non-specialist schools being monitored?

- What is the impact of the policy to increase the number of specialist colleges on children's choices for secondary education, on their learning and future careers once steered by a school's specialism?

Questions will continue to emerge as more is learned about the impact of specialist school status. Through this research we have indicated the need for alternative measures of success to be valued in addition to examination results. We have highlighted the effects of specialist school status on the lives of managers, teachers and children who sought to maximise the positive differences such initiatives could bring to their schools.

### Notes

1. On being awarded specialist status on the Specialist School Programme, a school becomes known as a Specialist College; consequently the terms 'school' and 'college' are used interchangeably.
2. Any maintained secondary school in England can apply for specialist status in one of ten specialisms: arts, business & enterprise, engineering, humanities, languages, mathematics and computing, music, science, sport and technology.
3. General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) are national examinations which are practical and vocational in nature.
4. References to key sources are coded as follows: mainstream school (S1), special school (S2), head teacher mainstream school (HTS1), head teacher special school (HTS2), head of performing arts mainstream school (HPAS 1), head of performing arts special school (HPAS2), non-arts staff mainstream school (NASS1), non-arts staff special school (NASS2), arts staff mainstream school (ASS1), arts staff special school (ASS2), pupils mainstream school (PS1), pupils special school (PS2), pupils' parents (special school) (PPS2).
5. Creative Partnerships is a government-funded initiative to develop creativity in schools.
6. An ArtsMark is awarded to schools that show a commitment to the full range of Arts: music, drama, dance, art and design. It is a national award scheme and is managed by Arts Council of England.
7. Gifted & Talented is a government initiative which provides schools with additional funding to allow them to make special opportunities available to accelerate the development of the 10% of the children in the school who are identified as academically gifted or having a talent in sport.

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