

The impact of Leap Confronting Conflict interventions on academic achievement in schools

It would not be controversial to say that challenging behaviour in the school environment is a major barrier to learning and academic achievement.

Worryingly, across the schools that approach *Leap* for conflict resolution work, there is often a skills gap within the teaching staff to manage these behaviours on a daily basis, that can result in staff being unable to teach, young people being unable to learn and the whole community feeling overwhelmed and demoralised.

Leap Confronting Conflict works on a whole school philosophy and strives to support the school community from senior team and teachers, support staff, lunchtime and cleaning staff and local neighbours, along with students in embedding a new culture of managing conflict.

The menu of interventions

Training whole year groups and targeted groups (e.g. prefects) in basic conflict resolution can have an effect on levels of emotional intelligence in the school as they become more skilled in handling everyday differences before they escalate into damaging violence or bullying.

Further training for smaller groups in peer mediation or how to run conflict resolution workshops for younger pupils (such as year 7 transition groups) has a cascade effect, passing on the tools and techniques to lower years.

Working directly with students at risk of permanent exclusion as well as those being reintegrated into school life, around issues of anger and conflict will encourage and support them in working cooperatively and collaboratively with fellow students and staff.

Many schools are supported to set up peer mediation schemes, whereby trained young mediators give their time voluntarily to help resolve arguments and minor conflicts among their peers. This can have a cumulative effect in reducing higher levels of conflict in the school as students begin to take responsibility for everyday differences and their own behaviour towards others.

Leap's training provides opportunities for young people to achieve at school outside of academic curricula, for instance by taking on roles as leaders, mediators and peer facilitators within the school community.

One of the areas *Leap* focuses on is equipping staff teams (including advisers and mentors) with some practical tools and skills to support their work. *Leap* can also work with tutors and their tutor groups in the training room together, to help benefit the relationship that teachers have with their students.

Research and Feedback

With an increasing emphasis on 'softer skills', with the introduction of the new SEAL objectives and an improvement in the use of PSHE and Citizenship classes, it is becoming widely accepted that social and emotional intelligence is a more reliable predictor of achievement, success and social mobility than academic achievement alone. It is crucial to actively support the development of social and emotional competencies of young people in order to enable them to engage fully and successfully with academic curricula.

The following research and quotations give a glimpse into the positive impact of *Leap's* work on many areas of school life.

External evaluations have shown that:

"benefits included:

- a positive change in school culture and ethos;
- a significant reduction of high-level conflict previously experienced by both young people and staff, with bullying less likely to escalate into physical violence;
- staff feeling less threatened by conflicts when they do occur and more confident in dealing with them;
- greater self-confidence among young people to take responsibility for their behaviour and achievement;
- an increase in annual attendance rates year on year since 1995 [one year after work began with *Leap*];
- a fall in the number of permanent exclusions since 1995/6;
- general improvement in GCSE examination results year on year since 1996."*

"We hope to maintain a close partnership with LEAP, not only because of their excellent professional input so far but also because we believe it is vital to maintain input from beyond the world of school education. Our work in confronting conflict is not solely defined by the boundaries of the classroom or playground. We aim to remain aware of the volatile nature of the community of which we are part and the impact it has upon the achievement of our pupils."- Laura Worsley, Deputy Head, Morpeth School

Before *Leap* began working with Morpeth school, exam results were amongst the poorest in the borough. 3 years later, Head teacher Alistair Macdonald wrote that:

"The school has undergone a major transformation. Levels of conflict and violence have been reduced dramatically and exam results have improved so much that we were ranked 4th in the entire country in terms of improvement over a 3 year period. It is extremely difficult to disaggregate the factors that have contributed to this change. However as Headteacher I am in no doubt whatsoever that aside from the direct benefits that have accrued for our pupils in terms of their ability to understand and resolve conflict, there has been a huge indirect impact on achievement through the improved quality of relationships in the school resulting from our work with LEAP.

* *Emotional Health and Well-Being: A Practical Guide for Schools*, Prof. Helen Cowie, Dr. Chrissy Boardman, Dr. Judith Dawkins & Dawn Jennifer, [Paul Chapman Publishing, 2004], p88

Teacher energy has been released and can now be channelled into raising levels of achievement. Visitors, including Inspectors, frequently comment on how well our pupils relate to and support each other irrespective of gender or ethnicity. This is all the more significant given that in our local area there are still high levels of adolescent crime and violence and in the recent General Election the BNP polled 3,000 votes.”

Conflict Audit

In November 2006, *Leap* conducted a Conflict Audit at Morpeth School, which is a research tool aimed at identifying the levels and nature of conflict experienced, the effects of conflict and how it is managed. *Leap* found more than one pupil using the word 'privileged' to describe how they felt about being at Morpeth School. Given the location and demographics of the pupil population in Tower Hamlets, this is quite extraordinary. Students reported that they are extremely happy to be at Morpeth and expressed a very high regard for the school: “it’s the best school in the borough”; “deep down I’ll always love Morpeth School”.

Relationships between staff overall were extremely positive: “there’s a lot of harmony”; “we support each other”; “I find the place warm and welcoming”; “really good positive relationships”. *Leap* also reported that the Senior Management Team are excellent role models for staff and pupils in how to respectfully and skilfully manage conflict and challenging behaviour, as are the Heads of Year. Staff and pupils show a huge amount of respect for one another. Continuing to develop meaningful interactions and relationships year on year at Morpeth is a significant success, particularly in light of the diversity and difference that exists in the wider community.

These programmes are not one-hit-wonders. Cultural shifts can begin to take place early on, but the most impact is seen when the learning is embedded in the school’s culture and ethos. Programmes like these should become a crucial part of the social and educational journey of learning that every young person experiences.

- “This gave me the chance to get to know my tutor group in a different way and to learn strategies for helping them (and me) to resolve conflict”

Teacher 2006