



Most of us can remember an inspirational teacher; a subject brought to life by an individual and which thrilled us as students, inspiring us to follow a particular course, sometimes even a career.

And most of us will also be able to remember the first time we entered a truly inspirational learning environment – perhaps as a fresher on campus at university, or maybe our first place of work?

But how do you put the two together? Create a learning environment that students really feel proud of, inspires them to greater achievements, and which is filled with inspirational teaching that students will remember and value for the rest of their lives?

It's a tall order, but one that I believe we have been incredibly fortunate to instigate here at Bedford Academy.

Given the right leadership and motivation, training, and by making each day a shared team experience with common, measurable goals, great teachers can be developed. I am also a firm believer in the differences the physical learning environment can make – helping both teachers and students feel proud of the environment they occupy, and equipping them with the best tools to teach.

First steps

In 2010, Bedford Academy replaced a floundering school and, although initially housed in an old fashioned, fifties-style school building with cramped classrooms, dark

Designed to **INSPIRE**

AT BEDFORD ACADEMY, THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT MAKES A VITAL CONTRIBUTION TO GREAT TEACHING AND LEARNING, AS PRINCIPAL CLAIRE SMITH EXPLAINS...

corridors and short sight lines, we still set out to instill a brand new attitude and sense of purpose from day one.

We were under no illusions with regards to the challenges ahead: our students are from a wide mix of cultural and ethnic families and some twenty-six languages are spoken in the homes of our students, many of whom have Eastern European, Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds.

Our first task, then, was to introduce mechanics designed to lift academic achievement. We extended the school day for students, effectively giving them an extra six weeks of learning over the course of the

academic year.

The Academy opens daily from 7.30am through to 5.35pm with enrichment activities available at both ends of the day and spanning tutorials, visits and trips, visiting speakers, and participation in Academy events such as concerts, sports activities and productions. Interestingly, one of our most popular enrichments is astronomy.

For Years 9 – 11 students, attending at least one enrichment session a week is expected; while sixth form students can stay on site until 5.35 each day to complete individual study or take part in enrichment activities.

The additional time teachers have with students in enrichment classes really helps wider student engagement with the school and, I believe, has a direct and positive impact on teaching core curriculum subjects. These sessions help to build good teacher and student interaction, and are a useful diversion from pure academia.

We have also introduced hour and a half lessons across all subjects – a process designed primarily to heighten attention levels. Students have the time to settle, focus and become deeply engaged in the subject and are not just 'killing time' until they can have another corridor chat en route to the next lesson. The creation and implementation of careful and rigorous lesson structures that ensure a variety of activities throughout the lesson period are key to making these work effectively but, in our experience, the actual learning environment is more intense as a result.

We have invested extra time in maths



and English to ensure the highest standards of literacy and numeracy across the board and, in our early years here, put considerable emphasis on intervention programmes to help students towards those all important exam grades essential to future career and educational pathways.

Intervention is also underpinned by our 'Access Centre' providing a student-centered approach to additional support – essentially an academy within an academy for students requiring more intensive support at any particular time.

We are now moving towards a 'Stage not Age' approach to the curriculum, where students are able to progress through their qualifications at a pace appropriate to them as individuals rather than according to their age alone.

People power

Such changes are still considered quite radical and require a particular type of teacher to implement. They have to be adaptable and flexible in their working hours, have the communication skills to cross the language and cultural differences – not just with students but with parents and guardians too, while all the time pushing towards greater academic success.

From the start we negotiated individual teacher contracts to accommodate the flexibility required. These were aligned to performance against which we set individual goals, and matched teacher training to these.

We have also extended traditional roles to include new responsibilities for some of our staff: for example, we now have Personal Achievement Leaders who develop student character; and we are probably amongst the first schools in the country to have an assistant head teacher to be given responsibility for developing students'



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Claire Smith is principal at Bedford Academy, which opened in 2010, replacing a failing school in a challenging, multi cultural, urban town.

character in her job description.

Our Developing Character initiative is based on the on the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Programme) schools in the US, which focus on character, and is designed to raise aspiration in students from underprivileged backgrounds.

The KIPP NYC approach to character combines the experiences of teachers with the research of several leading psychologists – including Dr. Martin Seligman (University of Pennsylvania), Dr. Christopher Peterson (University of Michigan), and Dr. Angela Duckworth (University of Pennsylvania).

Put simply, the research shows that people who are successful in life are more likely to possess seven particular characteristics: grit, zest, optimism, social intelligence, gratitude, curiosity and self-control. Because of the nature of the student body at Bedford Academy, and some of the challenging circumstances

they face, we felt that 'character building' would be very appropriate and empowering.

Working with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) we developed a bespoke programme for Bedford Academy, focused around a student passport, where students are rewarded for demonstrating these characteristics through their work and behaviour at school. And it's working. The teachers report that students are more attentive in class and relate this to student understanding of the character building principles.

Environment issues

In late 2012 we moved into a brand new £22.5m purpose-built school building, which ultimately will accommodate some 1400 pupils. The initial impression from the outside has often been compared to a university campus, even an airport – low, wide, and flooded with natural light. But once inside the feeling of scale disappears and there is a feeling of inclusivity.

Central to the design concept was a system of 'Learning Villages' providing designated spaces for specific subject areas.

The whole Academy is organised into five 'Learning Villages', allowing students to be tutored vertically and receive more focused mentoring, support and opportunities to lead. Similar to a traditional 'house' system, students move between Learning Villages to receive their specialist teaching and use specialist equipment but return to their Village for pastoral activities.

Physically the Learning Villages are presented in the building's 'hub and spoke' design with four 'spokes', each housing a separate 'Village'. The spokes run from a central atrium that accommodates the 'whole of school' communal areas including the main hall, dining area, reception and lecture theatre.

A fifth Learning Village, Science and Technology, has been given maximum prominence elevated above the rest of the school in a penthouse style third floor space which appears to 'float' above the rest of the school – highlighting our specialist science and technology provision.

Other design features include triangular rather than linear corridors, which also house round 'work pods' for small group work.

The new building enables 'passive supervision' where teachers can keep a vigilant eye on pupils without creating a sense of constant supervision – in a school of 1400 students it is vital that all students feel safe and cared for as individuals.

Early feedback is positive. Teachers and students love the openness and natural light. The building design is also felt to encourage a sense of community and belonging.

So have we created an inspiration teaching and learning environment? Maybe the last word should go to Ofsted which stated in its latest report:

"Students respond to the academy's high expectations and behave very well. The environment is friendly, but purposeful, and students say that they feel well supported and completely safe. The academy specifically fosters the personal qualities of 'grit, zest, optimism, social intelligence, gratitude, curiosity and self-control', which combine to promote well-mannered and considerate young adults."