

Robert Clack School

The following information has been taken from Male, T. & Palaiologou, I. (2019) Sustaining the Comprehensive Ideal: The Robert Clack School'. Palgrave Macmillan.

The Robert Clack School is a state-funded secondary school in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. Its catchment area is characterised by high levels of poverty and the demise of the manufacturing industry (Ford Motor Company) with the consequent loss of well-paid employment. The school is situated in the Becontree Estate which was built to accommodate these workers. The population up until 2000 was largely white working class, but by 2011 this had changed and the population had become much more diverse, with all census key ethnic groups being represented.

During the 1990s, Robert Clack Comprehensive School (as it was then called) was exhibiting chronic levels of underperformance. The school reputation and attainment of pupils had fallen dramatically and the school was known locally as 'The Robert Crap' school. One teacher, who had witnessed the growing problem of misbehaviour first-hand, described the corridors and playgrounds of the school as 'no go' areas.

'If you were a decent teacher, your own classroom was your enclave and you stayed in it, you didn't go out into the corridors, because you would see things you didn't really want to see. So you either walked away from it, which was obviously some people's approach, or you had to do something about it, which then caused you massive, massive headaches. Nothing was ever so simple as "can you stop now?"' (Male et al, 2019, p. 11).

A wide range of stories tell of poor attendance, pupil unrest, poor discipline and belligerent parental engagement, which left teachers feeling uneasy and unsupported.

All these difficulties were highlighted in an inspection report of 1995, which ultimately led to the retirement of the existing head and the surprising appointment of Paul Grant – a radical choice as he was a head of department within the school with no previous senior leadership experience.

Immediately after Paul Grant was appointed to the post of headteacher in May 1997 three things happened:



- A meeting with governors to explore just how he intended to lead the improvement process
- He introduced himself to the whole staff of the school as their headteacher
- He took action in a way that shocked the student body and the local community, many of whom were in a state of self-interest that precluded the school from being a meaningful experience to them

One of the governors who was part of the headteachers selection process said:

‘He knew the score better than anybody else because he’d been at Robert Clack teaching for about six years, so he knew exactly what was wrong. When he started as head he was on a mission. He could see clearly the way forward, what to do and from day one nothing was going to stop him.’ (Male et al, 2019, p. 19).

The day after his appointment, he called a meeting of the school workforce to describe to them how the school would move forward under his leadership and presented, by many accounts, a clear and inspiring vision of how things were going to change for the better.

‘That first day he held a meeting which basically empowered us. He promised us faithfully that things were going to improve. That actually felt like, if I’ve got a problem now something will be done and that kid will be dealt with. You need that in a school, but also staff felt valued.’ (Male et al, 2019, p. 19).

His promise to the staff was immediately backed up by his first assembly with the pupils, in which they were asked to leave the hall for different reasons, such as no uniform or talking in assembly. All pupils knew that from that moment on the situation was going to be very different.

This quickly led to the third immediate response of the new head in his quest to take back control. Exclusion notices were issued to a total of 246 pupils in the first two weeks. Paul Grant described this as the only way he could get to talk to the parents.

Marathon sessions of the governing body were held and, in the end, only eight students were permanently excluded, with only two more ever being permanently excluded in the next 20 years. Pupils were forbidden from going offsite at lunchtimes, a decision which was welcomed by the local people and shopkeepers who had been regularly intimidated by pupils from the school. The headteacher and senior staff patrolled the streets, travelled on local buses, visited health centres and hospitals

where pupil conflict was in progress and went to the homes of uncooperative pupils to engage directly with parents and families. Significant levels of support were beginning to emerge, characterised by comments from local people such as, 'you're doing the right thing. Whatever you do, don't back off'.

The initial confrontation with some families whose child had been excluded needed personal courage, as they were described by the chair of governors as 'incredibly scary' and the exclusion committee met in the town hall because they had security staff to provide protection from a heated exchange with members of the family.

The tone was set for changing the school, with the next stage being to start the process of enhancing the learning environment, starting with defining 'The Robert Clack Good Lesson'.

The pupils' right to learning was now the fundamental philosophy of Paul Grant, who, driven by a personal value system rooted in his own working-class background, based his approach to education on the notion of critical hope: giving young people the knowledge skills and opportunity to choose their destiny. Driven by a sense of social justice, he sought to develop an environment within the school which recognised the qualities and achievements of the student body beyond the classroom.

School assemblies became a way of recognising achievement. Any visitor to the school would be required to take a seat on the stage with the headteacher, who would then talk to pupils about why someone had made the journey from one end of the country to the other to visit. Awards, badges, medals, lectures and talks about how to become great gave the pupils the idea that they had a place in the world.

The whole ethos of the school is based on giving working-class pupils an equal chance. The focus is to instil in them that they have life chances the same as anybody else regardless of where they have been brought up and for them to have that positive feeling about themselves. By 2014, 80 students had offers for university places including Russell Group universities. Over 80% of Year 11 achieved the benchmark attainment of five GCSE subjects, including maths and English. In 1996, 23% of pupils left with no academic qualifications, but by 2014, every pupil in the school left with some examination outcomes.