



A Lucky Duck Book

Creating A Vision For Your School

Moving from Purpose to Practice



Professional Development



Printable worksheets



CD-ROM

Sarah Bainbridge

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Sarah Bainbridge



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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure, as Head teacher at Air Balloon Hill Junior School, to write the foreword for this book written by my Deputy, Sarah Bainbridge.

Our school has traditionally enjoyed a high level of pupil achievement and it was far from clear at the outset how further work on our vision could benefit us. However, having seen the results of all the hard work that Sarah and the staff have put into this project I can now safely say that we need not have worried! Having a vision seems to act as a lubricant to everything we do, from the quality of the teaching right down to the cleanliness of the playground. We now all share a common view point on the direction our school should take and the final destination on which we should all focus. It is important that everyone shares this strategic viewpoint (not just the management team) and the methods outlined in this book show how this has been achieved. Through careful consultation with staff, students, parents, carers and governors, and the subsequent implementation of many good ideas, our school has benefited since this work was started. I therefore recommend this book as a source of inspirational ideas and practical actions that you too can take to make your school a better place.

Brian Phillips, Head teacher, Air Balloon Hill Junior School, Bristol

1. Introduction

About this book

Why write a book about creating a meaningful vision and positive ethos within a school? I think the first reason lies in the beneficial results that such an exercise can have within a school.

Having spent over 25 years within the teaching profession and having taught in a variety of primary schools I have observed that success is born from positive ethos. This ethos is generated by a shared and agreed vision between stakeholders combined with shared accountability and a sense that everyone feels valued.

My professional studies during my teaching career reaffirmed these observations. Part of my BA (Hons) degree focused upon the need to foster positive relationships and it was during this period that I felt fortunate to be tutored in Teacher Effectiveness and Behaviour Management by Barbara Maines and George Robinson. The practical application of their methods and techniques have been invaluable during my teaching career and have since proved equally useful to the whole process of creating and implementing a vision.

It was whilst studying for my NPQH qualification that I became aware that it is the shared vision and values of a school that shape and support the whole decision making process within it. In 2002 I was fortunate to become Deputy Head at Air Balloon Hill Junior School in Bristol and it was here that I had the opportunity to put into practice all that I had learnt previously. Below is an extract from a recent Ofsted report which gives a picture of the type of school Air Balloon is.

Description of Air Balloon Hill – Ofsted 2002

This is a larger than average junior school catering for 332 pupils aged between seven and eleven. There are only ten more girls than boys but there is a marked imbalance in the number of boys and girls in some year groups. Pupils are organised into 12 classes each with a single age group. The eleven-year olds are taught mathematics in sets, teaching groups organised according to how much pupils already understand about the subject. The majority of pupils is white, some are of mixed ethnicity and eleven pupils are Black British. All pupils are fluent English speakers. Fourteen per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals; this is broadly average. About 17 per cent of pupils (broadly average) are on the special educational needs register; about eight per cent have significant learning difficulties and two per cent have a statement of special educational needs. The main difficulties include moderate learning difficulties, emotional and communication difficulties and some specific learning problems. The school serves a stable community and there is very little movement of pupils other than at the usual times.

At an early stage it was decided to make use of local educational consultants to assist us in our journey and, as I had previous experience of her methods, the logical choice for me was Barbara Maines. Thanks to Barbara and her 'wise words' (and of course the support of everyone at the school) the whole process proved to be successful and is continuing to be so.

It was from all these positive experiences that I was prompted to record the journey that we undertook as a school so that others may benefit from our experiences. The main purpose of this book therefore is to outline how one school approached the problem of creating a vision together with lessons

learned and advice to others who may be considering a similar venture. My second reason for writing this book is related to my belief in the universal applicability of the approach we adopted. As I embarked upon this task I soon became aware that a flexible, easy to manage approach could be of use in a variety of environments and not limited just to schools. I feel sure that, with a small shift in emphasis, the tools and techniques we used could easily be applied to any organisation.

How should you use this book? Well this depends largely on your current position within the process. The book provides a step-by-step account of events as they occurred. For those who are considering a similar venture from scratch it should be an easy matter to simply follow what we did and draw ideas and lessons learned from it. The book also contains templates for all the important documents we used which could be used to 'kick-start' a new initiative.

Those who have some experience of this process, or who are part way through it, could simply refer to the completed examples from each of our sessions for a source of ideas. The book also outlines a 'road map' for success, a typical guided recall exercise and a ten point checklist of essential things to remember. I think these will be useful to anyone involved in a similar venture, regardless of where they are in the process.

Of course, many of the techniques and ideas discussed can be used on their own and applied to an on-going situation – not just in schools.

We certainly learnt a great deal from the experience and in the process also had a lot of fun. I hope you do too!

What is a vision?

Someone once said that, 'Vision is seeing the masterpiece while you are mixing the paints.' It is the process of taking in the current big picture and trying to envision a different future state. Because it is essentially concerned with forward thinking it should become part of the normal strategic planning process for any school. If done correctly, it will draw upon the beliefs, goals and environment of the school and should form the backbone of a positive and inspiring system.

In terms of a school a vision may be defined as:

- an optimistic yet realistic dream of what we would like our school to be
- a preferred future state
- a stated goal that provides direction.

As organisations in industry have been using vision and mission for a long time now it might be useful to examine a typical example of a vision statement drawn from this sector.

The Ford Motor Company's vision is: ...'to become the world's leading consumer company for automotive products and services.'

A typical example of vision statements drawn from education however might be as follows.

'We aim to inspire a thirst for learning, the confidence to achieve and to build a caring community,' or, 'Learning and living together in a happy, caring and stimulating environment.'

The important thing to remember is that each statement is specific to the organisation or school and should mean something special to them. With most organisations trying to be the best in their field this is sometimes difficult to do but is nevertheless a worthwhile aim.

Benefits to be gained from 'visioning'

'Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare.'
Japanese proverb

Although the process and outcomes of creating a vision may seem vague and superfluous, the longer-term benefits are significant and very real. In particular creating a vision helps a school to break free of convention and encourages thinking 'outside the box'. In order to do this you will need to undertake the process of 'visioning' (as it is sometimes called) in a safe and secure environment where new ideas are encouraged and possibly innovative ways of working are explored.

Visioning also supports long-term strategic planning, largely by avoiding the common stop-start approach to school development that can be so disruptive and counter-productive. Visioning on the other hand, by its very nature is not a short-term, knee-jerk reaction to imposed change (possibly for the worse) but rather a catalyst for carefully planned change (hopefully for the better).

Another important outcome from successful visioning is that it helps define the schools direction and inherent purpose. It alerts everyone in the school to their 'reason for being' and makes it clear where their efforts should be directed. Stakeholders in particular are considered vital to successful visioning and, of course, without them most plans or initiatives would never be successfully realised. As we shall see, the full involvement of stakeholders is essential for a successful outcome.

As visioning should involve everyone then it should also encourage a widespread interest and commitment. Typically people should feel they not only have a stake in the school's success but that they also 'own' the outcomes from visioning. This, of course, assists in building confidence in the future of the school and promotes a sense of loyalty and pride.

The bottom line should be an improvement in efficiency and productivity within the school – something everyone will agree is a good idea!

In summary the main benefits of creating a vision statement are to:

- unify people at all levels toward a shared goal
- bring focus and clarity to our desired future
- energise teams to achieve a common purpose
- develop communications and a common set of values throughout the school

Drawbacks and cautionary notes

As with all processes there are risks that, if not identified and resolved, can seriously devalue the process and the eventual outcomes. This book will document the issues we faced and the way in which we overcame them but for the record it might be useful to highlight some common 'vision killers' here.

One common vision killer is a slavish adherence to tradition. The past is safe but the future is full of doubt and fear – so why not just do what we've always done? History tells us a great deal but we need to progress and move on. Although we should always be aware of lessons from the past, we must also bear in mind that 'yesterday's solutions won't be good enough for tomorrow's problems'!

Fear of ridicule can also be a major obstacle to the visioning process. However, if visioning is conducted in a safe and creative environment then fear of looking foolish should evaporate as people become more confident to put forward new ideas without ridicule. Initially, an attitude that 'no idea is too ridiculous or crazy' is a healthy one to adopt if you truly want to seek something new. Later

you may decide as a group to reject or postpone the least desirable ideas without fear of sapping people's self-confidence but ridicule encountered early on in visioning will lead to poor results.

You may also encounter so-called 'naysayers' who habitually seem to offer a negative and possibly even aggressive attitude to anything new. These individuals need careful handling as, once again, they can create havoc with the whole process. One particularly useful technique is to identify their specific area of competence and make good use of it. This supports the concept of ownership and you will find that busy people tend not to have much time to moan!

Outlined below is a real-life example of how a lack of momentum can also cause slow progress or even a total lack of progress towards your goals.

Rejoining class after breaktimes

Lining children up in the playground before entering the building had always been done and had always caused anxiety for all concerned:

the Head teacher as he had to stand guard over the whole school whilst staff assembled, the staff as they had to calm jostling children in their lines and the children as they were pushed and shoved and coped with the ensuing scuffles.

The obvious answer was to jettison the whole idea of lining up and find a more relaxed method of entering the school.

The decision was made for staff to collect their classes informally by going into the playground and holding a hand high. The children were then able to follow their teacher into the school in a friendly relaxed manner avoiding previous rowdy entrances of the past.

At the start this idea worked really well. However, in a short space of weeks this system began to collapse as some children were failing to wait for their teacher before entering the school, resulting in 'traffic jams' outside classroom doors.

It was at this point a more established member of staff voiced the opinion that this 'new system' was not working and that we should go back to the old method of collection.

It was clear that change was uncomfortable for this teacher who was reluctant to analyse the reasons why this new system was failing.

Fortunately, the Head teacher could see its benefits and was ready to look for practical solutions to the problem. After some discussion it became clear where the problem lay.

Staff were not collecting their classes at the same time so some children became anxious when they saw other children entering the school before them and thought that they had missed their teacher. This resulted in children entering the school without their teacher.

It was decided that at the correct time for entry into school the Head teacher would go to the staff room and ensure all staff left together. The Deputy remained in the playground to ensure children waited for their teacher.

After a while the routine became established and everything began to work more smoothly with fewer problems when entering the school.

Naturally this innovation would need monitoring and tweaking where and when necessary.

Without doubt this change was a change for the better that may have been blocked by fear of the new.

It is always tempting to return to the 'known' as it is safer to fail in a way that is understood. Sufficient time therefore needs to be taken to allow innovation to work coupled with a willingness to adapt and persevere when necessary.

Another block to realising the vision can be staff apathy. As we all know, in the teaching profession this can be born of sheer fatigue! Increasingly staff are under pressure to achieve more and more in their time at the workplace and may feel they are too burdened by routine day-to-day tasks to worry about a vision. It is easy to feel that there is not enough time or energy to enable the vision. This should not be allowed to occur. Time and, if necessary, money must be set aside in order to achieve success.

The real-life example below shows how a lack of funds, for example, can completely halt progress.

Case study

Two members of staff volunteered to see that plants were put in and around the school building. This was added to our list of short-term targets. When we came to review the progress made on our targets it was found that no progress had been made.

The two people responsible said that they were unable to achieve their target as they had not been provided with enough resources. When asked what they needed they said money to buy the plants and time out of class to buy and organise them. The financial issue could be solved easily enough with money being made available for the task. However, the time out of class was a trickier issue. With PPA time already in place and time out of class for staff development, this was going to be an added drain on the school's resources. Not only would the school have to pay for extra supply cover but also the children would be losing their teacher at an important time with SATs around the corner.

It is vital that each step towards the vision is seen to be achievable within the constraints of the working day. Careful planning and assignment of responsibilities to those with an interest in the task all help to achieve this but ultimately visioning must be given the priority it deserves to succeed. Initially it will require commitment of extra time but if successful could well help to reduce the routine workload and make life easier. This is similar to the person who is too busy to attend a course on time management hence denying themselves a possible avenue of escape.

It is also common to find that organisations employ VINO – Vision In Name Only! Everyone has heard of this thing called a vision but no one knows what it is or why it's important. Visioning is then treated as a paper exercise, as another job we have to do to keep the authorities happy and, once done, something we can safely ignore. This is unfortunate as the time and effort required to create a vision is then wasted. Why not spend just a little more time and effort making sure it is embedded and doing something useful?

I think it is also important to bear in mind that you will need to develop and apply a range of supportive techniques in order to achieve success. Some of these are clearly associated with the visioning process (e.g. guided recall) whilst others are not obviously so (e.g. the 'self-concept' approach). As long as the method works for you this doesn't matter – just use it.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, visioning is allied to strategic thinking so one aspect that must be guarded against at all costs is negative, short-term thinking. If your visioning is to work at all then a long-term strategic approach needs to be engendered. How this is achieved is something akin to baking a cake (not easy) but hopefully the rest of the book will show ways in which it can be done!

Conclusions

- A vision can be defined as a preferred future state that everyone agrees with and works towards.
- Visioning is not just a paper exercise – action is needed for it to work.
- Visioning must lead to positive change if it is to be beneficial and worthwhile.
- If carried out successfully, visioning supports the strategic direction of the school.

2. What We Did

Historical events that led to this project – what was learnt?

Air Balloon Hill had previously considered its vision and ethos. However, it was felt that this early work needed to be reviewed. With the arrival of a number of new staff (including me) there was a need to review progress, secure commitment and hence define the school's ultimate direction.

From the start it was clear to me that the school was successful and benefited from strong leadership, as the extract from Ofsted, below, clearly shows.

This continues to be a good school... it is well led and managed... there is a strong shared determination to sustain current rate of improvement (Ofsted 2002).

However, we were made aware of the need to re-examine and clarify our vision when our School Improvement Officer asked if all our stakeholders were aware of it. We were doubtful as we ourselves were unsure of exactly what the current vision was.

Borne of this uneasy situation we decided to engage in a new programme of vision and ethos training.

Initial staff reaction varied greatly but was mainly one of cynicism ('We've done it before,') and disbelief ('What's that?').

'I felt it was going to be merely a paper exercise with nothing useful at the end of it,' Teacher Yr3

'I didn't want just meaningless words in a vision statement,' Teacher Yr 6

This did not surprise me as vision and ethos sessions in my previous schools appeared to merely be 'going through the motions' without transferring values into actions.

For example:

Case study (from a previous school)

During one inset session it was decided that the wearing of school uniform should be enforced to enhance the image of the school. Although this was minuted it was never acted upon. Even though the decision was unanimous it simply did not work. Why? Well largely because the parents and the children had not taken part in the consultation process. Those needed to make it work were not involved.

Faced with this somewhat negative view of vision and ethos training I knew that the programme that I planned to deliver needed to be relevant and 'hands on'. Staff had to feel that their thoughts and opinions had been heard and included. Also they had to be able to see the benefits of each session immediately. They needed to see that their ideas were making a real practical difference to the school both inside and outside the classroom. Finally, they must feel part of the shared dream for the school.

Road map

Overview of events as they occurred

The events as they occurred are summarised in the table below. Of course, the sequence of events and the methods we used do not need to be copied exactly in order to achieve success. They are merely offered here as a guide and can be modified to suit the situation as needed.

Phase	Event	Purpose
Preparation	Inset Day 1 Setting the Scene	<p>To remind ourselves of our purpose as a school.</p> <p>To understand the reasons for creating a vision.</p> <p>To generate enthusiasm and to agree the need to make things better.</p> <p>To ensure that any vision is shared with the children and based on our relationships with them.</p> <p>This initial session was facilitated by consultant experts.</p>
Preparation	Staff Inset Session Generating Ideas from Staff	To identify what needs to be changed by using a 'guided recall' exercise, (comparing where we are to where we want to be).
Preparation	Generating Ideas from Other Stakeholders	To gain ideas from pupils, governors, admin and support staff and to ensure they had a sense of 'ownership'.
Preparation	Consultation with Parents	<p>To ensure that parents were included and able to make a contribution.</p> <p>To ensure that parents had a sense of 'ownership'.</p>
Preparation	Staff Inset Session Identifying Common Values	<p>To categorise our agreed values into the four main areas that are essential for the successful functioning of a school</p> <p>To develop Values Statements in the 4 key areas from above that reflect our agreed values</p>

Phase	Event	Purpose
Planning	Staff Inset Session Generation of Value Statements and Initial Vision Statement	To clarify in writing the core underpinning values and to prioritise subsequent actions. To generate in initial vision statement which everyone shared and could be developed further.
Planning	Inset Day 2 Barriers to Progress	To identify factors that may inhibit or prevent desired change. To enhance listening and problem solving skills.
Planning	Staff Inset Session Areas for Action	To sort and select actions and put them under our four values headings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment • Relationships • Teaching and Learning • Aesthetic and Spiritual
Action	Staff Inset Session Prioritising and Allocating Responsibilities	To prioritise actions and who will take responsibility and action them.
Assess and Review	Staff Inset Session Review of Progress	To take stock of achievements to date. To report on those targets achieved, those in-hand and those which have yet to start.
Assess and Review	Staff Inset Session Assessment of Benefits	To assess what has been gained and what still needs to be done.
Assess and Review	Where Next?	To look back and decide what went well and what we could have done better. To plan for the next phase, including the setting of new targets. To publish and advertise our achievements to all stakeholders and the outside community.

3. Setting the Scene

– Inset Day 1

Introduction

In order to promote enthusiasm, and set the scene, it was felt that we needed to bring in an external expert to facilitate this introductory inset session. We felt an external consultant would allow us to think ‘outside the box’ and not get bogged down by parochial issues.

Barbara Maines was chosen for this role. Why? She not only had vast experience as a successful Educational Psychologist but she also had first hand knowledge of our school, (having skilfully managed several of our most disaffected pupils in the past). She was also highly respected for her contributions in the educational field, not only as a lecturer but also as an established author.

One might normally expect this initial session to be all about ideas generation. Although this certainly happened it was actually more about exploring our initial reasons for working on a shared vision. Our starting point would then be established and our reasons for embarking on this journey would be clear.

Aims of session

- To remind ourselves of our purpose as a school.
- To understand the reasons for creating a vision.
- To generate enthusiasm and to agree the need to make things better.
- To ensure that any vision is shared with the children and based on our relationships with them.

What we did

This initial session involved all teaching staff and focused mainly on our ‘customers’ (i.e. the pupils) and the importance of the children’s ‘self-concept’, in other words how they felt about themselves and their sense of value within the community. The success of our vision and ethos training was felt to hinge on these key stakeholders being able to trust each other and respect all points of view.

As an exercise we initially looked at past incidents that had turned us against certain aspects of our own education. We quickly realised that a negative interaction can easily lead to a damaged self-image as the example below illustrates.

Activity: Childhood Memories

One of the activities we undertook included remembering a time when we were pupils and had been made to feel bad about ourselves, often due to careless words or the actions of unwitting teachers. This activity was very revealing as it quickly became apparent that we had all suffered in this way as children, even to the extent of remembering names and the actual words spoken. This frightening discovery made it apparent how easy it is for we as adults to cause lasting damage to a child’s self-concept just through a simple dismissive comment or thoughtless action.