

PRIESTNALL SCHOOL

EDUCATING FOR LIFE

Gareth D Morewood

It has always been important for me that Priestnall School is a truly inclusive, community school. I have been Director of Curriculum Support (SENCo) there for 12 years and in that time we have regularly been judged as ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted and HMI whilst maintaining a truly inclusive philosophy. In this article I hope to highlight the strengths and positives for everyone.

My starting point is always the Salamanca Statement (1994):

‘Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.’

I felt it important not to look to others for ‘enforcement’ or ‘compliance’ but for me, as SENCo to take the lead and not only show others why inclusion is vital, but to empower everyone to support our community as a whole. Many argue that ‘pressures’ such as academic attainment and short-term goals are more important and ‘outweigh’ truly inclusive values and principles; at Priestnall we continue to demonstrate that a truly inclusive environment benefits all. It is important that schools understand this is still very much worthwhile.

A key part of the maintenance of an inclusive school community is appropriate provision for all; one of our more unique experiences was a series of Dog Training sessions held on Monday evenings, set up to support the transition of students new to the school. We had eight young people with their parents/carers and their dogs for a series of sessions, which included support and information from a local veterinary practice. Jack, one of our students on the autistic spectrum in year 7 thoroughly enjoyed the sessions, as did his mum! Jack enjoyed getting to know the other dogs - the next day telling his form



tutor and peers all about it – the interest from other students in Jack’s animated stories about the sessions was even more powerful, as verbal interaction and reciprocal communication had been virtually non-existent previously.

During a recent visit to Priestnall by Tara, Chloe and Joe from ALLFIE, Jack commented on the highlight of his year so far being the Dog Training – and Jack was keen to point out that ‘Tara’ was his hero.... ‘Tara the dog that is!’ when chatting animatedly about the sessions.

Finding appropriate ways within the curriculum and outside of it to support positive engagement is a vital part of an inclusive ‘offer’. Indeed the recent year 7 Parents/Carers evening was filled with glowing comments about how some of our most vulnerable young people had started to really thrive on the opportunities – which, perhaps not surprisingly, has a significant additional impact on attainment and progress, when comparing individual starting points upon entry to Priestnall in year 7.

Recently I had the opportunity to catch up with an ex student, Gabby, now a young lady of 22. Gabby’s contribution to my core values is immeasurable; having worked with her in year 5 right at the start of my SENCo career. Gabby has never let disability define who she is, and with this approach my philosophy developed significantly. Gabby used her GCSE art to look at other’s perceptions of her disability when compared with who she was, as a person. This developed further into the short film ‘Notions of Self’ – exploring who we are, through dance, music and art – which culminated in an evening performance. You can see the film at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjOEwWNtk3A>

Gabby was and continues to be a real inspiration, and during the recent visit from ALLFIE she recounted her work experience travelling to local primary schools to inspire the next cohort of young people. Gabby found an increased level of challenge to daily life when leaving Priestnall School; and this replicated many recent stories of young people really thriving in our environment but then struggling with post-16 providers, and in Gabby's case at University with a lack of understanding. These stories make me even more determined to ensure the inclusive agenda is maintained and valued as a real human right.



Afonso, a young man currently in year 11 also offered his thoughts and experiences of being a student at Priestnall. Afonso commented:

"I am 16 years old and have been in mainstream education since primary school. I am really pleased to be in mainstream at Priestnall. I am a bright teenager and wanted to show it. I am doing well and will achieve good GCSEs. I have already got a grade C in core science. When I first started at Priestnall, some pupils would not speak to me or look at me. When they wanted to know anything

about me they would ask Miss but Miss told them to ask me themselves. Very quickly they realised I was a person, and I now have many friends."

Key elements of our work allow young people to really be 'themselves' and also for peers to understand diversity too; many students choose to tell their peers about themselves with an 'agreed script'; Lois, a student in year 9 explained to her peers about her needs on the autistic spectrum during a Life Education lesson – she felt it was time.

Our inclusive model is based firmly within a Whole-School Approach – this is well evidenced through some of our pioneering work in this area with regard to autism (many articles and papers can be found on my website – www.gdmorewood.com). A shared, corporate responsibility for all is vital, something which is replicated in our whole-school rewards systems maintaining the whole-child ECM outcomes as most important and our 'strap-line' – 'educating for life'. In ensuring each individual young person is treated as such, whatever their starting point in life, creates and generates a truly harmonious environment where learning thrives.

But, it is important to remember that learning isn't always about academic outcomes; maintaining the animal theme an ex-colleague was moving away so we swiftly agreed to have her tortoises in the Faculty as residents. The looks on students faces and the shared responsibility for their wellbeing has allowed for unparalleled peer-to-peer support. Witnessing some of our most vulnerable young people sharing the experience of looking after the tortoises provides some truly unique inclusive moments, something we see every day.



It is impossible to capture a 12 year developing model in one piece of writing, however I have tried to highlight some of the specific elements that are key to a truly inclusive mainstream school community. Ensuring an inclusive curriculum offer, that there is an openness and honest approach to peer awareness and education and training staff and other adults is vital – the academic outcomes and progress against individual starting points follows.

We have evolved our staffing structure to have less Teaching Assistance but more whole-school training and specialist support; including Trainee Educational Psychologists undertaking doctorates at the University of Manchester; our own Speech & Language Therapist; a psychotherapist and

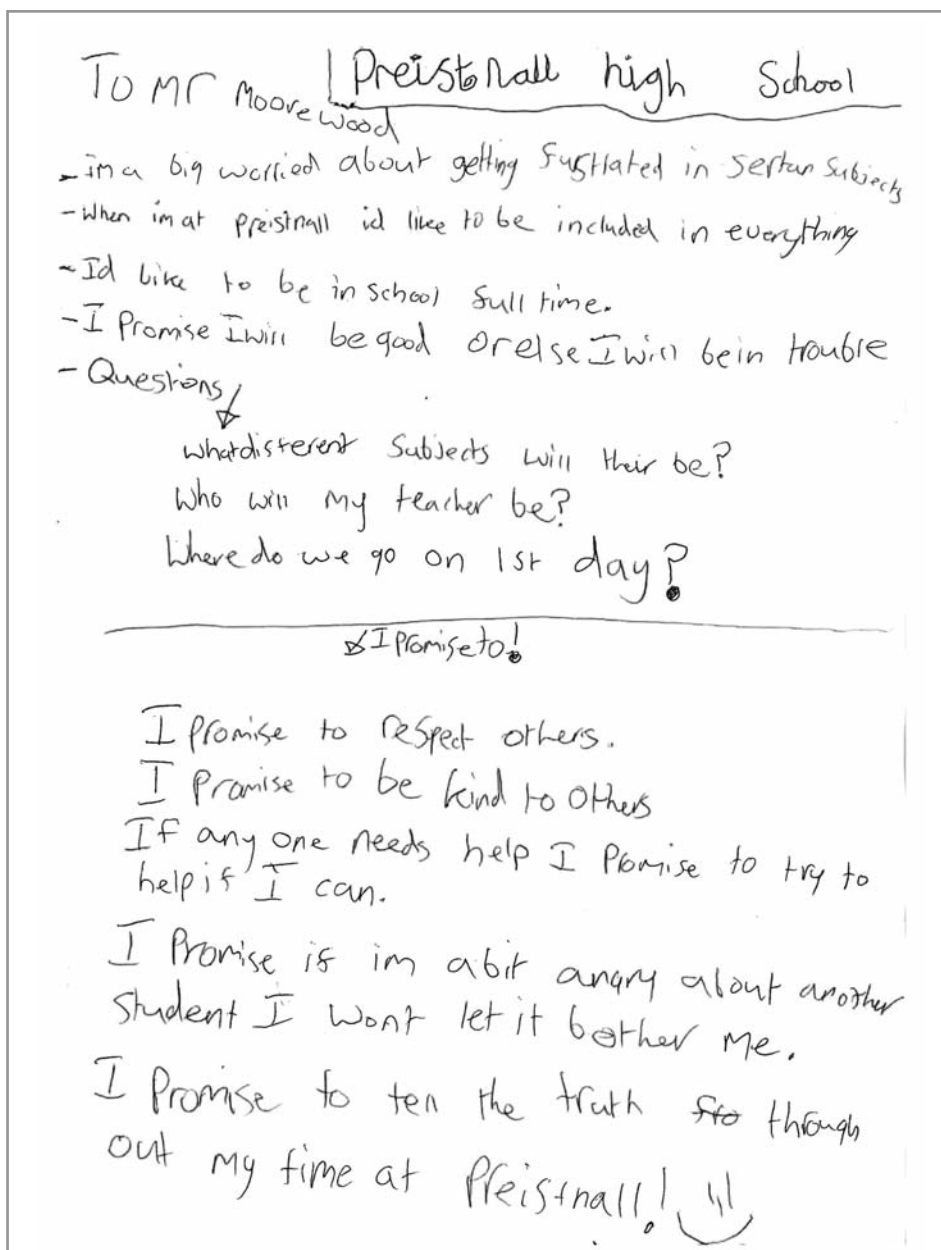
specialists who can deliver bespoke support packages to increase participation and access to everything we offer.

My final message I suppose, is a simple one; being an inclusive school has far more positives with regard to the value of all involved than negatives – and, quite simply, it can be done. I have been doing so for the last 12 years and continue to do so every day. Choosing not to do so is not an option at Priestnall, nor should it be anywhere else in the world.

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A letter presented to Gareth at a transition meeting with a young person currently in year 6 of her primary school, due to start at Priestnall School in September - a really positive starting point!