

John's Vision for Education – 'Aspire'

This idea stems from my perspectives on Aimhigher, with whom I work a lot. When Aimhigher has gone will schools still be looking for 'Aspiration Answers'? The work of Learning mentors has been the most successful and least lauded of the AH activities. Campus visits should - by now - be embedded in the way that schools work but beyond that not many obvious signs of AH will be around in schools apart from a suddenly empty office. SIPS are meant to crunch the data and analyse school performance, challenging schools to improve, but the quality is varied - I always felt that what local authorities offered was more limited, and that the richer reward is a 5 minute conversation with a school in California or Malaysia to deal with a common management problem.

An 'Aspire' movement drive/impetus/product is needed that can operate in schools or communities or council management teams or universities, wrapped around four pillars, or dimensions:

- International dimension
- Achievement culture
- Quality assurance
- Giving Voice (to individuals and teams)

Creativity must sit at the heart of the delivery, but also in the origination of the idea. If you look at most contract tenders and briefs from organisations you can tell immediately that they were hatched from within the four walls of the organisation itself. Now, we can rock up and deliver what the client wants. Fine. But what always strikes me is the cultural narrowness of what is being asked for from us. You would think that misfiring teams or unfocussed leadership were a feature only of that organisation, College, business, school, whatever. But then link them up with a similar organisation in the developing world and the real issues are suddenly in front of your face. The best thing I ever did as a Head teacher was meet Lebison Semmambo – the Head of Ndeeba Senior Secondary School in Uganda. Just to read his staff handbook was a lesson in itself. Only four pages and it began with his definition of what a teacher should do. Pretty important. Ours was forty pages of back-covering waffle and nowhere did we write about what being a teacher in our school actually meant. And a lesson in his school was one textbook (which the teacher had) and sixty attentive children. I don't know if Lebison knew how many questions he was suddenly asking us.

'Aspire' needs to be all about that. It amazes me that projects are always UK-centric or, worse still, 'area-centric'. No one talked about opening minds through the work being done in a French FE college that was ferry journey or a Skype video-call away. Schools and Colleges rarely talked about their achievement culture or simply the importance of working with people on how to have a voice – and identify what they want to say. Place making and environmental context are key. Time to get the blank piece of paper out and fill it with something new. The four pillars are a good place to start. We, as an organisation, need to make sure we believe in them too.