

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED TEACHING AND LEARNING

Re-Opening Minds

An Investigation into the transition from Opening
Minds curriculum to Key Stage 4

Ruth Morris, Danny Wilding, Gareth Williams

30/09/2010

Contents

Introduction	3
Method	4
Findings	5
Discipline	5
Pupil Resilience	6
Staff Development	7
Continuity between Opening Minds and Key Stage 4	9
Summary and Implications for Further Research	11

Introduction

The RSA Academy in Tipton, located to the north of Birmingham, opened in September 2008. It is the first school to be designed entirely around the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce's (RSA) Opening Minds competence framework.

The Opening Minds curriculum framework developed by the Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures & Commerce has its origins in the RSA paper *Redefining Work* (1998). The Opening Minds curriculum framework is based around five competency areas; learning, citizenship, relating to people, managing situations and managing information.

The Opening Minds framework is not designed to replace the National Curriculum, but is designed to be an alternative way of delivering the national curriculum and includes the specific teaching of competencies as well as subject content. A competence is defined as the ability to understand and to do and the purpose of Opening Minds is to teach pupils competences that will help them thrive in the real world.

At Tipton, the Academy is divided into three schools, Arts, Humanities, Sports and Leisure (AHSL), Language and Communication (LC) and Maths, Science and Technology (MST); lessons take place within one of these schools and are not divided into the traditional subject areas typically found in a secondary school. Instead pupils are taught in a more holistic manner with no clear subject boundaries and are done so in two three-hour lessons per day. The three-hour lessons are designed to allow for pupils to cover a range of information in a variety of learning styles. The Academy operates Opening Minds at Key Stage 3 (Years 7-8) whilst key Stage 4 (years 9-11) operates on a more traditional school setup consisting of clearly defined subject areas and specialist teachers. Some elements of the Opening Minds approach remain at Key Stage 4, for example it is intended that the competencies are still used as a framework for lessons.

At the start of the 2010-11 academic year the Academy moved into new purpose built facilities on its existing school site. The new school build was designed to allow space for larger class sizes, more creative teaching practices and to facilitate the three-hour lessons.

The research presented in this paper is set in the context of the transition from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 of a cohort of pupils that hitherto have only experienced Opening Minds. The small-scale research explores this transition period both from the perspective of pupils and staff. It was undertaken with remit to discover whether the concerns held by the Opening Minds pupils prior to entering Key Stage 4 were in fact realised upon entering Key Stage 4 and if these were having an impact on their educational experiences. The research also hoped to explore pupil and staff perceptions on whether or not Opening Minds had prepared the pupils for the educational challenges that they now face at Key Stage 4.

Method

The research focused on the experiences of pupils and teachers when managing the transition from Key Stage 3 Opening Minds curriculum to Key Stage 4. In order to understand the transition from the perspective of both pupils and staff the research team undertook a period of intensive observation at RSA Tipton Academy. In addition to observing lessons and a staff training day the research team spoke with staff and students regarding their experiences of Opening Minds and their concerns and experiences of the first few weeks of Key Stage 4.

The observations and the participants who spoke with the team, was largely shaped by our initial sample of eleven pupils selected by the Academy. The sample selection, consisting of 5 males and 6 females, was chosen to represent the range of pupil ability found at the Academy, from those pupils considered gifted and talented to those who were identified by the Academy as being of average or low educational attainment.

The research sample acted as a core sample of students around which wider interaction with the pupil population was based. Following this initial sample of students allowed the research team to cover a variety of lessons across different subject areas and including pupils of differing ability. As a point of contextualisation two Opening Minds classes at Key Stage 3 were also observed by the research team.

The research team were also afforded the opportunity to speak with a variety of staff, including learning support staff. Care was taken on the part of both the Academy and the research team to include the experiences of both staff heavily involved and less involved in teaching the Opening Minds curriculum at Key Stage 3.

To ensure the highest ethical standards this research was undertaken with the promise of anonymity to all staff and pupils who participated in the research, and as such the names of participants do not appear in the report. At all times the research team sought to minimise any disruption to the educational experiences of the pupils that formed the research sample.

Findings

Discipline

Opening Minds lessons consist of a different pedagogy than “traditional” lessons as student led questioning and group work seeks to break down to a degree barriers between learner and teacher. Some staff, especially those with less experience of Opening Minds, have found that their approach to discipline must be reconsidered considering the greater value placed on student feedback in Opening Minds.

The transition has not created any systematic issues of discipline for students. Year 9 pupils are familiar enough with general school rules to follow them appropriately; there has been some confusion over the correct procedure for entering and leaving breaks, but this is to be expected in a new building and is not an issue unique to Year 9.

The major positive feature of Opening Minds is the increased confidence and independence of students, reported widely by staff. Less experienced staff have found that these traits have caused some discipline issues. Students require more than a didactic approach to lessons; teaching from a board is not something that students respond well to in lessons. Furthermore, a tolerance for “chatting,” is also something which staff more experienced with Opening Minds have identified as different. This is partly because students are used to managing time, where they balance social aspects with work, and often because “chat” is simply a continuation of utilising each other as a learning resource, which they have grown used to under Opening Minds.

Staff with less experience of Opening Minds have faced some difficulty in converting to such an approach. During the odd exceptional lesson where attempts to create uniform silence for three hours were made, or to prohibit interaction between students are found to be confusing by students used to another code of conduct. Indeed, restlessness can become an issue due to the length of lessons and can increase to the point where otherwise diligent students lose focus on their work. Students have noticed these changes, with many noting that their “new” teachers (i.e. ones that had not taught them before, often non-Opening Minds staff) were stricter. Some pupils found this acceptable, considering the perceived gravity of Key Stage 4 work, while others did not. A preference for “older” teachers (those who had taught students before under Opening Minds, the staff which the pupils were most familiar with) was expressed by some because of a preferred teaching style more similar to pedagogy they expect, or in the words of the students “how we learn.” Students disliked more traditional pedagogies, which emphasised the authority of the teacher, and emphasised quiet individual work, often listening to the teacher at the board, as opposed to the greater emphasis on group work and research of Opening Minds.

Of particular importance for discipline is consistency, students will not accept anything but consistent application of rules and procedures, and will not merely accept the authority of staff as absolute. Staff with a stricter pedagogy, often focused on perceived “strong” discipline, those who do not apply sanctions consistently face confusion and anger from students.

Similarly, several staff discussed that a benefit of Opening Minds is that it allows students of varying abilities to contribute effectively to classes. Even if a student was not perceived by staff as academically gifted, they may be talented in competences such as leadership or team

work, and therefore still succeed at Opening Minds. KS4 has a greater emphasis on completing assessed work and exams than under Opening Minds. Thus some students could no longer draw on their strengths to the same degree as they did before.

The new timetable has also affected discipline in some lessons, as students are now split into sets in core subjects and different options. None of these issues are universal or common, but a combination did in some cases create issues for the class:

- Size of class- some options classes tend to be smaller than compulsory subjects, and thus increase staff contact time with each student
- Core class Setting- a factor in students performing less academically in some cases are behavioural issues; some staff felt that setting in some cases concentrated several pupils who were less attentive together in one class. Some students in lower sets felt that they were “thick” and became less engaged, whilst in other cases setting simply grouped students together who found the subject either more difficult or less interesting.
- Choice- students expressed a preference for subjects that they had chosen to pursue in KS4 over compulsory options, in part because they chose what they enjoyed. Alongside this, some students expressed less enthusiasm for lessons that they had no choice in studying.

Our study has shown that Opening Minds itself was not harmful to discipline at KS4 in any noticeable way. We studied two Opening Minds classes, and discipline was still maintained with silence whilst another student or the teacher is speaking, and few problems of misbehaviour. The issue is instead that a conventional KS4 does not appear to work well with many Year 9 pupils who have only experienced a wholly Opening Minds curriculum up until this point. Many staff avoided a traditional approach, but that some continue to do so, suggests that the staff support that is already being provided should be extended, as well as accepting that staff require a reasonable period to adapt to the unique structures they are being asked to work under at RSA Academy Tipton.

Pupil Resilience

As has been noted in the previous section on “Discipline,” students felt most comfortable and responded best to staff who taught in a manner similar to Opening Minds, where they felt that teachers could understand their learning preferences and styles. Difficulty was encountered when teachers attempted a more traditional approach.

A common fear amongst pupils towards the end of KS3 and for some pupils at the start of KS4 was that they were unprepared for KS4. Two factors seemed to contribute to this feeling: starting KS4 a year earlier and the need to complete important qualifications at KS4 where content was the paramount concern. There was a limited concern among students that they were not mature enough to begin KS4, and that some of their work would suffer. Some pupils were concerned that they had not completed enough groundwork before starting KS4, so that their extra year would be “catch-up.” Linked with this was the acknowledgement amongst more able pupils that KS4 repeated work that would be completed during a normal KS3. Since these students had not completed a normal KS3, they were concerned that rather than repeating this work (in the words of some, “revising,” it) they would have to learn more unfamiliar content during KS4 than they otherwise would have. However, few pupils expressed difficulty in the work that they were set at KS4. There are two reasons why this might be the case. Either it is the case that, as is the perspective of most staff, students have

less basic content but are able to assimilate information more easily as a result of Opening Minds. On the other hand, it could be the case that students have yet to face work that they would struggle with. The relatively short scale of our research prevents a conclusion from being reached on this issue.

A recurring observation amongst staff was that students lacked a depth of knowledge in subjects, but had an increased breadth of knowledge and capacity to learn. Few staff expressed serious concerns about students being sufficiently prepared for KS4. One staff member noted that now students had chosen their options, they would be able to specialise their learning appropriately. Opinions of students' preparedness for longer writing tasks varied amongst staff, with some feeling that students had become used to shorter activities and group work. Others felt that students were adequately prepared, and if they were not, would be by the time they began their exams.

Almost all pupils we spoke to regarding the transition from Opening Minds to KS4 regard the change as positive. They are happy and excited to be in KS4, studying their chosen subjects and having distinct lessons which they feel adds clarity to their learning. Many students offered negative opinions of Opening Minds in certain aspects. Some found lessons repetitive and boring; others were confused about what they were accomplishing in terms of subject content. Students tended to prefer the smaller classes and specialised teaching of lessons at Key Stage 4 compared to Opening Minds. Nevertheless, many students acknowledged the uses of Opening Minds, expressing the opinion that they were better prepared for life outside of school and had wider skills. Students found the continuity of competences between Opening Minds and KS4 reassuring and provided a guiding framework for lessons, easing the transition. A commonly missed aspect of Opening Minds was providing feedback from lessons (though not necessarily through the more reflexive feedback of WWW and EBI); some staff had continued this into KS4, whilst others had not.

Some students did have issues with setting within classes. Most classes were aware of what set they were, and how they compared to other classes. Some students who were not in the top set expressed resentment that their peers (some of whom they felt that they performed equal to or better than) being in higher sets and having harder work (and thus more valuable). Other students, particularly in lower sets, were despondent and felt either bored or that they were "thick."

Generally, students are responding well to the change, and are generally very resilient. Most of their concerns can be dealt with by staff addressing them or by both staff and students having more time to get used to KS4.

Staff Development

'At first Opening Minds was an alien concept but once you have got it, that's it, you wouldn't want to go back'

'Before Opening Minds I was getting bored of the repetition of teaching, I was considering leaving the profession but now I love teaching Opening Minds.'

'The Opening Minds students are a different breed; they are articulate, independent and confident in expressing themselves.'

The RSA Academy sees a broad spectrum of teachers from those newly recruited through the Teach First scheme to teachers who have worked there for over 30 years. They all face the same challenge of getting to grips with incorporating the Opening Minds approach into their lessons. Whilst Opening Minds is currently implemented throughout Key Stage 3 it is only beginning to be used more widely in Key Stage 4. In order for Opening Minds to be successful in Key Stage 4 staff need to be able to incorporate the competencies effectively into their lessons. This need to incorporate Opening Minds across year groups is the focal point of the transition for teachers, but it is not always fully embraced. It was clear that not all teachers had the same understanding of Opening Minds. In some lessons teachers were sure they were teaching in an Opening Minds style, whilst in fact they just put up a competency on the board and failed to fully implement it. It also became clear that some teachers have different and often higher expectations of the Opening Minds students. One staff member noted that they had attempted to organise some group activity requiring performance in a lesson, yet students were not as confident as they expected. They noted that had that not been an Opening Minds class, they would have introduced the activity more gradually. This demonstrates that there are high expectations of the Opening Minds students and they don't always live up to teachers' perception of them being more confident and articulate.

The transition for teachers to the Opening Minds approach appears to be a much bigger change for them than it is for the students. Perhaps as for some teachers it sees a deviation from the pedagogy they are used to delivering, whilst students have little choice but to adapt to the teaching style they receive. What became apparent from some staff at the training day was that staff, especially those less familiar with opening minds, needed more support to allow them to design Opening Minds lessons to a specific subject of study at KS4. This is especial considering our findings regarding greater student engagement with lessons which operate on a similar basis to Opening Minds.

However, once teachers have adapted and embraced the change it seems to work very well. During the research period at the RSA Academy it appeared that the real key to the Opening Minds approach at Key Stage 3, was finding the equilibrium between lessons being too content driven or too competency driven. This stability seemed to have been found at Key Stage 3 but remained a challenge at Key Stage 4. Some teachers expressed that finding the balance between content and competencies at Key Stage 4 was something that would take time to adapt to. What also became apparent was that whilst Opening Minds lessons at Key Stage 3 were organised in teams with feedback and peer review of material, the same was not true of Key Stage 4. Some staff expressed that planning in this way at Key Stage 4 would be beneficial; as many of them were new to the Opening Minds approach and it would give them a chance to confer with more experienced colleagues.

From the week spent observing and talking to teachers at the RSA Academy the following positives were raised about the implementation of Opening Minds:

- The Opening Minds programme has created a 'different breed' of pupils who are more independent, mature and reflexive learners.

- Students have been equipped with the tools to learn effectively, these skills will also be useful in the workplace e.g. research, team work.
- The use of two 3-hour lessons per day allows staff to get into their subject material and form better relationships with their students as they really get to know them.
- Teachers find the Opening Minds style of teaching far more interesting and creative.
- Opening Minds creates a common “learning language” which allows students and staff to communicate common ideas across a range of subjects and years.

The following concerns were also raised:

- At first Opening Minds is overwhelming for teachers as they have to get to grips with a very different approach to teaching. They are expected to change their teaching habits from what they have been used to. This applies to new staff as well as members of staff who have been teaching for years.
- Teachers who had trained in a specific subject now found they were expected to teach a broad spectrum of subjects. This was sometimes daunting.
- Opening Minds does not seem to lend itself so easily to more exam dominated qualifications such as GCSEs. The competencies are more easily incorporated into qualifications that are assessed throughout such as BTECs.
- Amongst staff and students, the concern was raised that students will need to assimilate considerable levels of new material and there will be less time for revision. However, some staff seemed to feel that this was counteracted by quicker absorption of information by students. Perhaps by explaining this opinion to students it would ease their own concerns.
- Opening Minds does not provide enough fundamental content knowledge for some core subjects e.g. Maths.
- More staff training days are desired by staff and thought to be useful. This is particularly because staff have few free periods in the week, and that often these are not at the same time as relevant colleagues. Coordination and planning thus become more difficult than it perhaps might under a more conventional school day.

Continuity between Opening Minds and Key Stage 4

‘I embrace the transition from teaching Opening Minds to Key Stage 4, I still teach in the same style which works well’

‘I struggled to adapt to teaching Opening Minds, I don’t think it prepares them enough for Key Stage 4’

The transition from Opening Minds to Key Stage 4 is generally not seen as a problem by the pupils. This is largely due to the fact that many aspects of their education experience remain the same, such as 3-hour lessons and the spaces in which they are taught. Opening Minds has also equipped students with a common ‘learning language’ that allows them to communicate with staff easily about which competencies they are using and what is expected of them. From the pupils we spoke to it was apparent that the transition was not a problem, and initial fears such as the workload being more demanding had largely dissipated. Although it must be

recognised that they have only just started Key Stage 4 and follow up research would be needed to confirm this was the case. From our initial observation problems only seemed to arise when they encountered teaching styles that did not embrace the Opening Minds approach.

Many of the students we spoke to expressed that they preferred being in Year 9. The reasons for this were often the same; more choice of subject coupled with being taught specific subjects by specialist teachers. The students enjoyed being taught in specific subjects as it gave them clarity of what they were learning in each of their lessons. Some students expressed that in Opening Minds there was confusion over what subject they were learning. However, the fact that at Key Stage 4 lessons were now subject specific and also incorporated the competencies, meant students felt they had clear objectives and focus during their lessons. It was also apparent that they felt school was more important now as they were preparing for specific qualifications.

From observation it is clear that the following aspects of teaching remain at Key Stage 4 and work well:

- Highly structured and disciplined day including 3 hour lessons, students know what is expected of them during the school day and therefore the transition runs smoothly.
- The space is used in an effective way, unlike the typical row formation that is seen in Secondary Schools. Instead the students sit at tables that accommodate six students, this enables group discussion. Tables are also frequently moved to the side of classrooms in order for students to participate in more active learning.
- Teachers who have experience of Opening Minds continuing to teach in a varied and engaging way.

We also observed that problems arose with the transition to Key Stage 4 in the following ways:

- Children are now placed in sets for core subjects and amongst those in the lower attaining sets there is often frustration. Some students said they felt more challenged in Opening Minds and now they feel they are seen as a failure. Equally some students stated that it didn't bother them that they had been placed in sets. This is an area that would require more investigation.
- Discipline and engagement issues arise when a teacher tries to use a traditional pedagogy. The students are intolerant of working in silence, they expect to be able to talk and learn from each other.
- Teachers who hadn't previously taught Opening Minds were clearly still trying to come to terms with its implication in their lessons. Some didn't seem to fully understand the purpose of the Opening Minds competencies. However this can be alleviated with time, experience and more staff training.

Summary and Implications for Further Research

The small-scale nature of the study is likely to mean that any findings are indicative, rather than definitive, in nature, but nonetheless some important findings and implications for further research emerged from the study.

Summary of key findings:

- On the whole pupils are resilient to change and adapted well to Key Stage 4.
- The fact that pupils had the option to choose specific subjects to study increased their enjoyment of school and aided the transition into Key Stage 4.
- A number of the concerns that pupils once had regarding entry to Key Stage 4 were no longer perceived to be issues by the pupils.
- One concern that was prevalent amongst a number of pupils regardless of ability was the perception that they were underprepared for Key Stage 4 with regards to the content knowledge in their different disciplines. This concern was most apparent in core subjects.
- This same concern was not widely shared amongst staff, who felt that despite lacking content knowledge in places that as a consequence of undertaking Opening Minds the pupils had an increased ability to assimilate new knowledge quickly and effectively. It was felt by the research team that pupils lacked the oversight of staff that would allow them to compare themselves to previous Key Stage 4 cohort. If this common perception amongst teachers was communicated to pupils it may go some way to alleviating this particular concern.
- It was generally felt amongst staff that this particular cohort of pupils was ‘a different breed’ to older cohorts of pupils also undertaking Key Stage 4. The Opening Minds pupils were considered more independent, reflexive learners and better able to get on with tasks set. They are also able to assimilate new material and capable of undertaking research.
- Further staff training is needed so that all staff have a shared understanding of Opening Minds and of how to implement it in a coherent and uniform fashion at Key Stage 4.
- Key Stage 4 lessons generally worked best when taught in a style similar to the Opening Minds with which pupils were most familiar. When this was not done pupil engagement in the lesson decreased and disruption, real or perceived on the part of the teacher, increased.
- Equilibrium still needs to be found between subject content and competencies in Key Stage 4 lessons, and further staff training will likely lead to improvement in this area.
- Staff appeared to expect more of the Opening Minds pupils and whilst sometimes this allowed the pupils to excel at other times teachers over-anticipated the abilities of Opening Minds pupils.

- The structure and format of the school day was most conducive to an Opening Minds approach to teaching. Attempts by staff to revert back to a more traditional didactic style were often met with subtle pupil resistance and increase in classroom disruption.

Implications for further research:

- The need to investigate the impact on pupils of setting in core subjects once they enter Key Stage 4.
- The working conditions of staff are in need of further exploration in order to determine the effect these conditions on both the experiences of staff and pupils at the school and on the educational provision available to pupils.