

# Who do you think you are?

**A CLEAR AND POSITIVE SCHOOL ETHOS CAN GENUINELY ENHANCE TEACHING AND LEARNING – BUT IT HAS TO BE GROWN FROM WITHIN, ARGUES HANNAH SUGGITT...**



**D**uring a Masters research project conducted in a successful secondary modern school, I asked a small group of students what they thought of their school motto (“Enjoy and Achieve”). I was surprised at the depth of their responses:

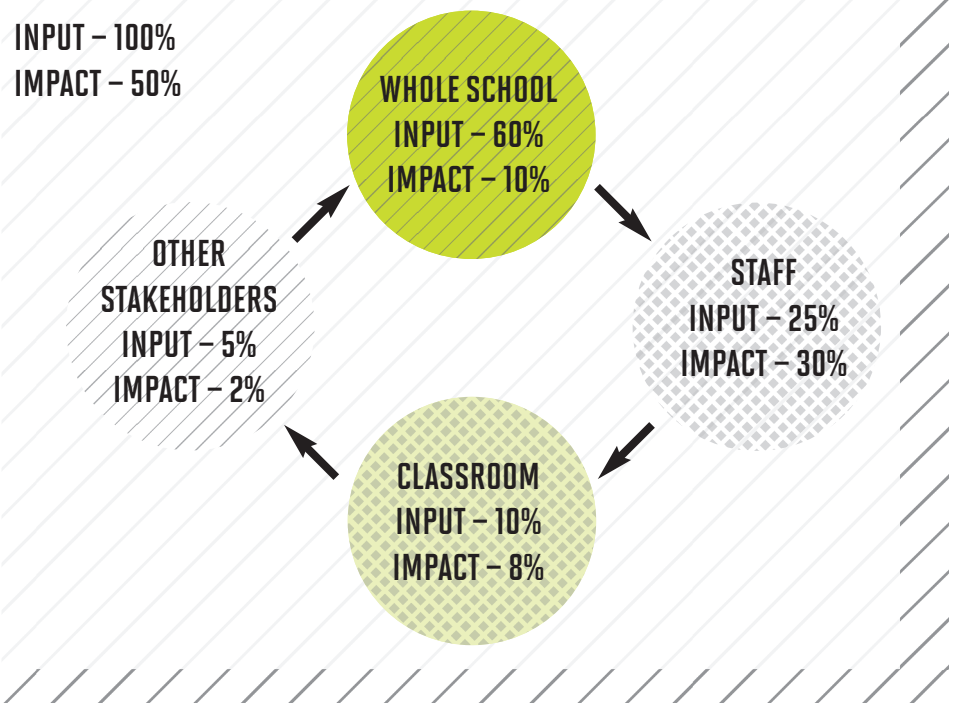
*“It shows us all what we’re about, what we do, what we like to do.”*

*“It’s not like everyone’s shouting it out like ‘Enjoy and Achieve!’ ‘Enjoy and Achieve!’ It’s more, kind of, underneath that, like in lessons.”*

From these comments and others, it appeared that a school can attempt to ‘brand’ itself explicitly as much as it wants with mottos and school visions, but unless an idea is accepted and becomes a part of the living existence of the school it will not become a developed characteristic of a whole school ethos. For students to be so clearly influenced and affected by the ‘feeling’ of their school climate (or culture, or atmosphere), it is my claim that considerable attention should be paid to the development of a positive ethos for the betterment of our students’ richness of experiences within our education system. School ethos does matter, in other words, and time should be dedicated to explicitly cultivate it. But how?

## 1. Traditional Model

**INPUT – 100%**  
**IMPACT – 50%**

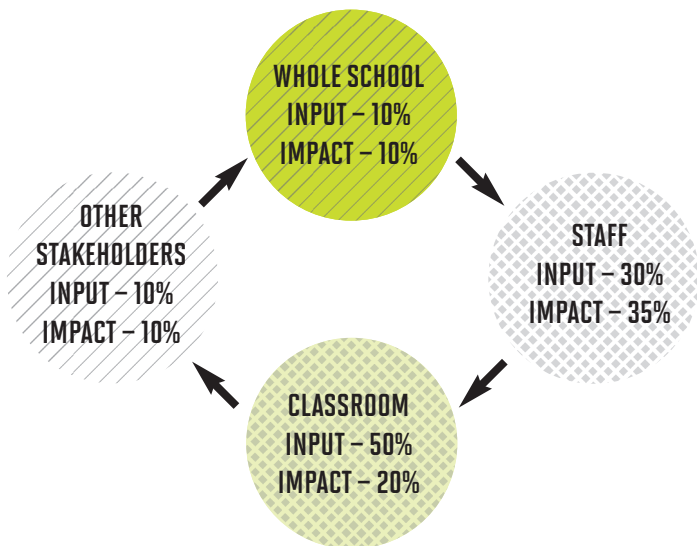


In the ‘traditional model’ of school ethos development (1, above), the most significant

input is delivered at whole school / leadership level, with very limited sustainable impact.

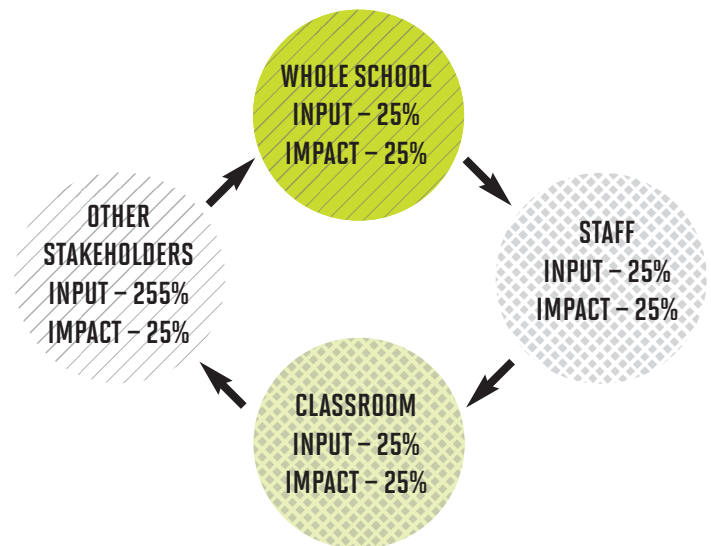
## 2. New Model STAGE 1

INPUT – 100%  
IMPACT – 75%



## STAGE 2

INPUT – 100%  
IMPACT – 100%



The diagrams above (2), in contrast, show a new model – in which two phases are required to embed the values and character of the school in a sustainable structure. In the short term (stage 1), the input is deliberately shifted from a ‘top down’ model to an ‘inside out’ one with the input of classroom interactions with students being the most significant factor. To ensure the sustainability of the model, however, each stakeholder group must assume equal responsibility in the creation, maintenance and further development of the positive school ethos. Where all stakeholders believe their input is equally valued (stage 2), they will be more able to support and reinforce other inputs as well as their own.

### Changing the model – a triple-stranded approach

#### 1. Whole school ethos (leadership)

In a recent statement, Ofsted inspectors made it clear that any school identity should be defined by the culture and ethos which is ‘typically’ present. In the traditional view, the development of this ‘culture and ethos’ has been the responsibility of dynamic and charismatic leadership, creating a sense of ‘community’ amongst stakeholders in adhering to a projected vision for the school. Research has shown that schools with a strong sense of ethos have higher levels of teacher retention, increasing levels of achievement and success, and better overall performance. With such potentially powerful results, it is clear that school leadership should be encouraged to measure and evaluate their current climate by making explicit what is so often implicit and embedded in classroom practice. To believe that a school ethos can be developed purely at a policy making level, however, is a fundamental error.

“AN ETHOS IN THE ‘EXPERIENCED’ SENSE MUST BE POTENT AND PERVASIVE IN THE SENSE THAT IT MUST EXERT A DISCERNIBLE INFLUENCE WITHIN THE ‘ATMOSPHERE’ AND CLIMATE OF THE CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS: IT MUST HAVE AN ‘IMPACT’”

MCLAUGHLIN, T. (2005). THE EDUCATIVE IMPORTANCE OF ETHOS. BRITISH JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES, 53 (3), PP. 306-325.

To create a positive school ethos, traditionally (as seen in model 1) the momentum begins with an individual – the head. To decide what the school ethos will be and present it in a vision for the school community is typical of the top-down model, with the most significant input given from leadership in corporately creating and contriving the desired ethos. This is then reinforced with activities or events, organised at a whole school level (sometimes extravagant in nature: school productions, concerts for communities, sports days etc) that may clearly project the sense of a tightly bound community with a potent and pervasive influence in the atmosphere. Whilst these moments surely do have an ‘impact’ on the climate of the school and the energy felt by those present, this is short lived. Without a reinforcement of this atmosphere within the everyday life of the school, an ethos cannot be sustainable.

In the ‘inside out’ model (2), by contrast, the significant input of leadership is, initially, dramatically reduced. To create a sustainable positive school ethos, SLTs are required, not to create the ethos, but to create the organisational conditions and the shared vision for all stakeholders (staff and students, parents, governors, local community) to buy into. It is this shared vision that is impressively powerful,

inspired by a single idea (perhaps a mission statement or school motto), but not projected as a ‘corporate brand’. This single idea, much like “Enjoy and Achieve”, is then naturally left to staff to embed as part of their own ideology, as modelled by the interactions and conversations within the leadership team.

#### 2. Staff ethos (individual)

An essential component of creating and maintaining a positive school ethos is through the role of staff; all staff – teachers and support-represent and project the values of the school, both as a corporate body and as individuals. Put quite simply, what students see on the ‘outside’ (through the social interactions and behaviours of staff) will represent to them what is on the inside (the heart of the school). With this in mind, the influence staff have when interacting with young people is an integral factor in shaping and projecting a school ethos – a factor so important that it represents the view of the school students see.

The inherent danger in a traditional model of ethos development is that a desired set of values for the school is imposed upon staff; morale and a sense of ‘belonging’ amongst teachers and other key workers within schools are key factors that need to be considered carefully by leadership members in developing

a sense of a 'shared vision'. In this traditional model, the teacher becomes the face of the ethos of the school, acting as a conduit in a downward flow of the school's inherent message. It is a stagnant and didactic perception of ethos development, considering a linearity to its creation (a one dimensional, single impact).

In the new model for proposed ethos development, the teachers and other classroom workers, through their interactions with students, both embody the school ethos, and so it is essential that all members of the school community put in the time and energy to bring the ethos to life, and the vision itself can guide their work. At the core of these ongoing interactions is the teacher – interestingly identified as a corporate group in both the letters and the transcript data. Integral to the teacher are his/her own ideology and belief/value system, both as an individual and a practitioner. There is a leadership control that will initially select (employ) a certain 'type' of practitioner, who would best embody the desired vision of the school. Indeed, teachers may be selected on account of their agreement and belief in the shared vision that the motto both provides and creates. Shared vision is argued to be 'a force in people's hearts' that, when successful, means 'people begin to see it as though it exists'. As teachers interact with students, there becomes evident an outward reflection of an inner culture. This then acts in turn to reinforce the school ethos back into the atmosphere and culture of the classroom, where students and teachers *together* create a self fulfilling prophesy of the school vision. It is both created and projected by the interactions within the classroom.

**3. Classroom ethos (students):**

Students are the most important element in the process of developing a positive school ethos; they are the individuals who can sense, most intensely and perceptively, the atmosphere of their school. In the research I mentioned earlier, students focused on their perception of school ethos as being evident and felt, almost

exclusively, within the small social spaces of the classrooms. The modelled values inherent through classroom interactions are then absorbed by students who recycle and enhance those values in their interactions with peers. The cyclical and causal nature of the influence of teachers is powerful, and so to develop a positive school ethos these 'moments' must be given the most detailed attention.

The research I conducted showed that students perceive their school ethos as an incredibly positive and powerful force. It has a very recognised impact and yet at times is located in the subtle and subconscious interactions within the very mundane and ordinary – for example, the use of praise, celebration of achievement (student names and photos on the wall, mention of specific achievements in school newsletter); interactions in extra curricular activities; a smile and 'hello' from a teacher in the hallway. All these epitomise the importance of the input and impact of the classroom ethos in model 2; when students exemplify the ethos they also reinforce it. The ethos itself is a self-fulfilling shared vision and is an outward emblem of a much deeper ideology that has been created in conjunction with this vision; the visible symbol of the ethos in the utterly integral social interactions of the classroom provides opportunities for influence.

To summarise, then, school ethos – whatever it may represent – has to be born within the collective consciousness of the school community, and must be brought to life through social interactions and personal beliefs. Unless the shared vision is accepted and invested within the members of the school, it cannot grow into any sort of self-fulfilling prophesy.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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**★ 4 STEPS TO DEVELOPING A POSITIVE SCHOOL ETHOS**

**1. SELL**

A vision is projected by dynamic leader/leadership for the whole school (in the form of a mission statement). It needs to be sold as an ideal and philosophy that can be shared collectively amongst all stakeholders invested in the school.

**2. CATCH**

Catch the vision by 'infecting' the body (of staff). For an ethos to be developed effectively, all members should believe in the principles modelled by leadership and feel a part of a community.

**3. LIVE**

Teachers, by their very interactions with students, project the life force of the school ethos. Students absorb this and reflect it back in every one of their interactions with peers and staff. Other stakeholders are 'infected' at this point and reinforce the consistency and coherence of the message.

**4. GROW**

At this point ethos is no longer 'built'. Growth of ethos is organic and self-perpetuating. Confident, established schools no longer 'sell' their ethos from the top down but rather 'live' it at all levels with the cycle now being 'caught, lived and grown' in a virtuous circle.

