

Climbing Towards Excellence, John R Rowling and Wyll Willis, Trentham Books, £16.99

Hang out the bunting. Rejoice. Put white cotton gloves onto your local bobby. Okay – this may be doing it, but at last a first-rate book about school improvement by people in schools. It's advice for us, about us and by us, and it is – without doubt – one of the best books of practical guidance I've read. I wish I'd written it.

John Rowling was a headteacher in Nunthorpe, Middlesbrough for 19 years and Wyll Willis has just taken over as headteacher at Wallingford School, Oxfordshire. Their book should be required reading for everyone in a leadership position (and I don't just mean senior management) in a secondary school.

The authors' premise of "excellence" is very straightforward. It's how to create a step-change in your GCSE results and, in particular, how to increase by 10% the number of pupils who gain 5 or more grade Cs. It's as simple and as focused as that.

As the authors demonstrate with supreme confidence and credibility, the secret boils down to a number of simple but essential details. So whilst the book starts with a vision, as all such books do, it's quickly into the nitty-gritty.

This doesn't make it in any way a mechanistic tract, or something that reduces teachers and pupils to robots. In fact, it's the reverse: the book demonstrates how we need to have higher expectations of the boys and girls we teach. It cites Michelangelo: "The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that our aim is too low and we achieve it".

Through focusing on the key population of pupils who can have the biggest impact on our results, we are shown how to sharpen up our management practices, building a key team of individuals who will take responsibility, using data in a more considered way to predict and monitor progress, and – in particular, delivering the mantra of personalised learning.

Underpinning the approach is an absolute focus on what is wanted and how to support those pupils as individuals – through motivation, support from Sixth Form mentors, and better teaching. There's also eminently practical advice on how to get all coursework completed by all pupils and on insisting on treating borderline pupils differently by giving them special attention to help them succeed.

If anyone has any qualms about this laser-like clarity of purpose, any thought that it might lead to a narrowing of pupil and teacher expectations, the authors justify their approach in a final chapter. They paint a vivid picture of results day and the effect of such success not only on the successful pupils and the headteacher, but also on the self-esteem and pride of the staff who have taught them.

Their thesis is compelling and uplifting, underpinned by a judicious range of quotations and research, but essentially a practical book that makes us realise what we can all achieve if we put our mind to it. Put out that bunting.

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