

The logo for PIXL, featuring the word 'PIXL' in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font. The letter 'i' is lowercase and has a white dot above it. The background is a vibrant orange with various circular patterns, including a large circle with a grid pattern in the top right and several concentric circles in the bottom left.

IGNITING LEADERS
CHANGING LIVES

'Invisible chains'

Pearl resources

January 2024

Invisible chains

The Pearl ‘Invisible chains’ addresses some of the things that may be stopping us or our students from moving forward as we could or would, if we were not held back. The Pearl asks some big questions that you may want to think about but here are a few more at a school level, and a personal level, to consider.

PARENTS and how we work with them:

1. Is the way we do parents’ evenings an invisible chain? For example, can parents get there, what about shift workers? Is the welcome they get one that reminds them more of a workplace than their own school days, could we have some of our students selling tea, coffee and cakes as they wait to make it more of a pleasant experience? Can we break that chain by softening the way into school?
2. Do we know the chains that stop parents engaging with us? Do we ask them about their own school experience, do our letters give them the impression that they are being talked to like children? Do we ask them the best way to get in contact with them e.g. WhatsApp, letter, text, call, email? Some schools ask parents how they would like to have communication, even asking them to WhatsApp a central phone rather than phone the switchboard. Some schools text parents through a system with reminders or nudges that help. Others call working with parents ‘parental partnership’ rather than engagement or parent liaison, so it sounds less authoritarian and more working together as equals with a joint vested interest in their child.
3. What do we know about the invisible chains that may also be a barrier to their children? Do we make an effort to meet them at the start of their time with us to set up the next several years? What could this look like? Might we ask questions that help give us insight, like ‘what are your hopes for your child at the end of their time here?’ What would ‘success’ look like for you and them? What do you expect from us as we educate your child here? We are better at helping free people and handling expectations if we know what they are in the first place! Schools who do this find out very valuable information before the young people even start – that information informs some of their approach.

STAFF and how we work with them:

1. Do you know what is holding your staff members back? If they do not have experience in an area they want to get some in, how do your systems facilitate that? How do you ensure that people are always seeing above and beyond your own school circumstances so they can get a different perspective? Some schools have magpie days where on a training day, all staff go to a number of different schools to look at an area of interest. Others are now moving away from a ‘one size fits all’ performance management and are giving staff an element of choice over what they do and how they do it, with them providing evidence. You could swap SLT members and have a different leader from a different school attend your meeting and observe and reflect what they have seen back to you.
2. Do we enable people to have a ‘taste’ of senior leadership? Some schools have associate SLT members, others rotate middle leaders into meetings, others allow secondments to other schools for a short period of time. Whatever it is you do, does it help grow leaders of the future and give them a taste before fully committing them to leadership?
3. How do we know what staff are passionate about and what may be holding them back? How do we find this out? Do we ask them insightful questions and listen to their answer? Things like, ‘if you

weren't afraid, what would you do in this job?' or 'what is the one thing you would like to change the most about your work?' or 'if you could ask me for one thing and you knew I would say yes, what would it be?'. Schedule in time to listen to staff and ask these questions and genuinely listen to their answer and work out what may be possible. It may be that you can help break an invisible chain for them – it is just that you don't know what it is as it is invisible to you!

4. Flexibility – this is a big issue and a real challenge, but we have to do better at working out how a career in teaching can be compatible with other interests or desires our teachers have or that you have. I know of some really interesting examples in schools. For example, co-heads or co-CEOs so that each can spend half of their time on other roles that may benefit the school or their own family (such as research or writing or visiting other schools). Some are investigating having a nursery so staff have discounted rates on places to make childcare more affordable and enable them to come to school as a family. Others allow two days paid leave whenever they need to take it, no questions asked. Another one I know of issues golden tickets for each member of staff to take half a day off whilst SLT cover them, and others allow staff to attend their own children's functions or to take them on their first day at school. Others allow staff to have PPE time at home and come in later, leave site or leave early. These are only a few suggestions to help break some of the invisible chains that may be limiting what people feel they can do in school. All of them take real effort and planning but they are possible if that is what you believe will make a difference to retention and recruitment, amongst other things.
5. Poverty – this is a massive issue but sadly, we know that this is one of the invisible chains that is holding millions of children in the UK back according to recent statistics. You will do much on this already: breakfast clubs, family breakfasts for parents too, providing food technology ingredients for young people who need it, providing twice the quantity so they can take more home, ensuring that students who receive pupil premium who are absent still get their allowance, minimising non uniform days, ensuring all school dinner portions are the same size (this should not have to be spelled out but I know of a catering provider who gave PP students a smaller muffin than non PP students – everyone knew and everyone could tell, and it came with a stigma so please make sure this does not happen in your school), and ensuring that young people are well fed so they have the stamina to concentrate, especially during exam time. Some schools find ways of involving the wider families when it comes to food, like having a tasting menu evening where families can come and sample the food on offer from school and have a free meal.

STUDENTS and how we work with them:

1. Target grades – what is your narrative around this and is it a helpful one? Some of these young people have no prior test data, others do but were not at their best, others performed well and are now struggling, some have changed attitude and now want to work hard, others have done the opposite. In light of all this, and the fact that the young people we are working with need to have some self-efficacy to break invisible chains, what are we doing to help this? Do we talk to them about the 'chance' of them getting this grade based on previous data? Do we ask their opinion? Do we ask them what they would like to achieve and why before we tell them any number or grade? Do we explore with them HOW they think they are going to achieve it and get them to identify their own attitudes and behaviours which will drive their success?
2. Taste of success – an invisible chain can be there when young people feel that they are a failure, or that they will fail, have always failed and are destined to always fail. This is one of the biggest invisible chains which we need to remove. In our schools, do we give every young person regular opportunities to taste success? This could be in sports, or in a competition or in representing the school; it could be in the attitude to learning grade or in a low-stakes test; it could be academic,

extra-curricular, their character shining through... Whatever it is, we need to make sure that every child is able to feel what success feels like and can identify what THEY did to make it a success.

3. Notice them – this seems very obvious, but do we make an effort to notice young people who may feel invisible? Who may be invisible at home for a number of reasons? When they are absent and then return, does a member of staff say, ‘we missed you yesterday, we noticed you weren’t in’? Do we spot when there are patterns of absence, perhaps always a Wednesday or always a Friday? Do we notice when behaviour deteriorates, and do we think what that could be linked to? The issue with any invisible chain holding someone back is that we sometimes can’t see it and for them it is totally normal so they can’t either – that is why they don’t walk free.

And then, last but not least, you – whatever role you have. What are your invisible chains? What is holding you back and how long has it been doing so? Sometimes just answering some simple questions and filling in the blanks can help us see them ourselves, so perhaps try these.

1. The job that I would be sad not to have done when I look back on my career is
2. If I stand back and look back on my life in the third person, the thing that is holding me back is
3. My limiting belief is
4. If I knew I couldn’t fail then I would
5. Think of a number line from 1-10. Where are you now? Where would you like to be? (Don’t assume this is 10!) What is the first step you would need to take to get one more number up the scale?

Invisible chains are sometimes hard to break but sometimes the hardest thing to do is to see them. Once we see them, we will find there are things we can, should and want to do.



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