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a reflective conversation with belle wallace, sue leyden, diane montgomery, michael pomerantz, carrie winstanley, and sally fitton



*RAISING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ALL PUPILS
WITHIN AN INCLUSIVE SETTING: PRACTICAL
STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING BEST PRACTICE*

(Pub: London: Routledge, 2010)

Recently, Routledge has published a stellar text outlining a series of practical strategies for raising the achievement of all pupils within an inclusive setting. In this interview, the authors crystallize some of the main points conveyed through the text. The book is based on detailed case studies of 12 schools in the UK, ranging from early years through to secondary. Importantly, the book outlines strategies for best practice which

address the needs of all pupils promoting the practice of inclusion with differentiation of activities according to pupils' needs and levels of development.

- Sally, I am going to begin with you because, first of all, we need to discuss the fundamental basis of what builds a successful school. What is the vision of the case study schools with regard to

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developing the curriculum to differentiate challenges for the able pupils?

The vision of the case-study schools does not cling to a narrow elitist view of recognising a small percentage of pupils as gifted and talented, but the schools are concerned to raise the achievement of *all pupils within an inclusive context*. The practitioners in these schools continually strive to provide more effective learning pathways for all, and in doing so, outstanding provision for gifted learners is developed.

In the case-study schools, leaders create a safe environment within an ethos and climate of high aspirations, expectations and respect. This climate enables pupils to work in a variety of ways, collaboratively, individually, and to make decisions about their learning, allowing individual differences and achievements to be celebrated and valued.

- **Sally, what are some of the identification strategies that the case study schools use?**

The identification of pupil potential in the case-study schools relies on a variety of approaches that fall into six main categories which are prioritised in the following list:

- A curriculum that provides a wide variety of opportunities for individual pupils to *discover* their gifts and talents;
- Teachers' intuitive, creative and professional assessments;
- Regular contact with parents with an 'open-door' policy for consultation;
- Checklists of well-researched characteristic features of high achievers and importantly, under-achievers (see Belle's comments below);
- Rigorous monitoring and tracking procedures constantly updated and

shared by all members of staff;

- Standardised tests of ability and attainment with emphasis on examining any disparities in pupil profiles.
- **Sally, would you like to comment on the styles of leadership in the case-study schools?**

Dynamic, hands-on, committed leadership from senior management and subject leaders is essential in supporting teachers as they develop an educational system that is based on individual progression and is underpinned by assessment for learning principles. Essentially, pupil voice is a very important element in this negotiated development: all pupils have the right to discuss their learning. Pupils certainly know when their learning is interesting, motivating and engaging; they also know when their learning assignments do not meet their needs.

The case-study schools demonstrate the power of distributed leadership and shared responsibility, and perceive the vital necessity of involving governors and parents/carers. In all the case-study schools, there is the feeling that everyone is involved, informed and responsible for the whole school development. In other words there is a strong feeling of ownership and commitment fostered by regular acknowledgment of effort, and professional reflection with the will to re-think and improve organisation and provision.

- **Belle, there has been much written about these students that we refer to as 'underachievers'. There have been many theories about why students do not live up to their potential. Could you summarise your ideas about the causes of underachievement?**

It is important to emphasise that although there are a number of inter-related general factors which bring about the overall syndrome of underachievement, essentially each individual has a unique set of characteristics. Hence, although we can discuss underachievement in general terms, the assessment of the causes of underachievement and the possible intervention (remediation) strategies need to focus on the individual learner and his or her special characteristics and needs. Also, we must recognise that there are some causes of underachievement that are beyond the power and capacity of a single school to remove: personal, home and community factors can be completely debilitating.

However, I think that one of the major causes of underachievement is lack of motivation caused by inappropriate learning tasks which do not link in with students' interests and abilities. Of course there are certain essential subject skills which need to be taught, and relevant research and recording skills which need to be developed as tools for learning; but when schools promote personalised learning and involve learners in the negotiation of what is learned and how it is learned, then learners have ownership and a sense of being an active partner in the learning process. Ownership and negotiation of relevant learning tasks is the key element that has emerged from all the case-study schools referred to in the book.

Another major cause of chronic underachievement that links closely with lack of motivation is lack of self-esteem. When learners cannot identify with the content and processes of the general curriculum, they tend to think that their alienation is due to a lack of something in themselves. They feel that other students seem to be coping and performing well,

whilst they are not, and consequently, they feel that schooling has very little to offer them.

Nevertheless, schools and teachers can and do make a difference. In all the case-study schools, the whole school development emphasis is on teachers developing good relationships with learners and their parents, so that on-going dialogue is maintained. Sensitive, formative assessment both by teacher and pupil is developed throughout the school, personal goals and ambitions are discussed at an early age, and extra-curricular activities cater for unusual interests and activities.

Although in the UK, as in most other countries, there are stringent national curriculum guidelines, the case-study schools interpret the guidelines in the light of students' needs. These needs are assessed through regular discussion with pupils, and portfolios of work are carefully stored and regularly referred to in order to provide evidence of levels of achievement and interests, thus avoiding unnecessary repetition of skills and content already mastered.

In summary, the pupils' needs are at the centre of learning, rather than the curriculum being seen as something immutable that has to 'be delivered'. Of course, this way of working needs flexible and creative teachers who will adjust a seemingly rigid curriculum and creatively interpret and align it with pupils' needs.

- **Belle, how do teachers go about 'tackling underachievement'? Are there steps to follow or procedures?**

The very first procedure is to develop a well-communicated policy of recognition and understanding of the complexity of the

whole spectrum of underachievement.

On pages 6 - 11 of the book, I outline what I have entitled 'Typologies of Underachievement'. This typology looks at possible categories of underachievement which fall into the following divisions:

- *Conforming coasters*: Learners falling into this typology could be termed 'invisible underachievers'.
- *Impatient inattentives*: Learners falling into this typology could be termed 'butterfly learners'.
- *Apathetic non-engagers*: These learners seem disinterested in most, if not all, school activities and could be termed 'mental absentees'.
- *Risk avoiders*: These learners seem unable to take risks and play safe within any situation. They could be termed 'safe players'.
- *Disaffected disengaged*: These learners are challenging and disruptive and could be termed the 'actively anti' or 'hard to reach'.
- *Doubly or multiply exceptional*: These learners have specific learning disabilities as outlined below in Diane's comments.

These typologies are extended to provide lists of observation criteria which every teacher should use on a regular basis. In addition, there are strategies that need to be firmly in place throughout a school. Although teacher perception and qualitative procedures for assessment are of primary importance, schools also use a variety of testing strategies that are quantitative; and these include appropriate verbal and non-verbal group tests, SATs levels, class tests and examination results. However, these kinds of test results yield a measurement that is derived from 'correct' answers. One cannot be creative with questions that require 'right' answers, and, consequently, innovative answers that lie beyond the 'marking scheme' are marked 'wrong'.

Nevertheless, quantitative tests when interpreted sensitively can be used to good effect when they are used diagnostically to ascertain a pupil's level of competence across a range of skills and knowledge needed for 'formal' school learning. Also, they are useful to compare performance across an age group on a range of skills necessary for school learning. When a pupil scores highly on a non-verbal test, and much lower on a verbal test, this can be an indicator of underachievement.

- **Sue, what do you see as the main social and emotional needs of gifted and talented underachievers?**

Children and young people whose intellectual development is precocious, or who are unusually talented, can often feel alienated from their peers. They may find it difficult to share the interests or concerns of children their age, to become 'one of the group' or to join in the activities that are considered suitable for their age group. Other children and adults can make such children and young people feel they are somehow 'odd' and not particularly welcome.

As human beings, we all share certain fundamental social and emotional 'needs'. If we are to thrive and to grow into successful, fulfilled human beings, we need to know, first and foremost, that we are loved and that we belong. We also need to be respected by others, to be valued for who we are, and for our views to be taken seriously.

Underachieving children are usually children who have learned to cope with their lives through 'switching off' because they are unhappy with what is going on around them. It may be because, as Belle suggested, the curriculum and learning opportunities

are inadequate or inappropriate. But, equally, it can be because they are struggling to cope with difficult home or personal circumstances and are unable to put in the time and effort needed to do things well. Past experience may have taught them that it is not safe to show oneself to be cleverer or more talented than others in the class. So, in the desire to be liked and to be part of the peer group, they may have learnt to mask their abilities. Alternatively, they may have become increasingly frustrated and alienated from the peer group, lost interest in taking part in social and learning activities, or become dismissive about the talents and contributions of others.

During the teenage years, the reasons for underachievement can be even more complex. When faced with the anxieties and confusions of growing into adulthood and with the physical, emotional changes associated with puberty, the need to belong, and be accepted by one's peer group becomes increasingly important.

However, I think it is important to stress the fact, as Belle has already done, that every child or young person is a *unique* individual. Every child has their own particular set of characteristics that makes them who they are and every child develops their own ways of responding to the challenges they face. Children, whatever their abilities and talents, do what they can to make sense of themselves and the world around them. The challenge for teachers is to discover, in each individual case, why the particular young person is underachieving, what purpose is being served by their 'coasting' behaviour, or their disengagement from school-work and activities. Teachers need to discover the particular 'blocks' or barriers that are preventing the young person from doing their best. Only then is it possible to find ways of re-engaging their interest and

willingness to become an active participant in their own learning and development.

- **Sue, How can teachers best meet these social and emotional needs? Can you suggest some practical strategies that schools can develop to remediate underachievement?**

Re-engaging an underachiever's interest in learning and doing well can be difficult, especially if factors within the peer group are influencing the young person's behaviour. Exhortations to work harder or improve a skill are unlikely to succeed! However, if teachers approach the problem with tact and sensitivity, it can be done. Parents/carers as well as other interested staff can be invited to explore ways which might best help the young person regain self-esteem and the desire to achieve.

In my chapter, I talk about the importance of the school developing an ethos in which everyone in the school community is valued and respected and their individual talents and contributions are recognised. I also describe a number of practical ways in which teachers can intervene directly in supporting gifted and talented children in school in their social relationships and in their studies.

For instance, teachers can organise class activities in ways in which young 'gifted' children can work *constructively* with their peers so that, instead of being treated by other children as 'odd' or 'different' and therefore not welcome, they can be seen to be a valued resource to the groups with whom they work. I also suggest ways in which teachers can boost such children's self-confidence by inviting them to help in planning lessons and activities for the class or for particular groups, and in carrying out small-scale research projects on behalf of the school.

For older students, identifying a purpose for the effort that will be needed and giving the young person ownership of the process is vital in overcoming underachievement. The best way to support older students is probably through helping them identify something they would really like to achieve in the near or more distant future, and then exploring with them what they need to do, what strategies they might use, and what help they will need in order to reach that goal. In my chapter I suggest that techniques such as 'Laddering' and 'Self-organised Learning' provide useful structured frameworks for conversations, where teachers can act as Mentors, helping students to clarify and raise their aspirations, and to plan and organise their own personal development and learning pathways.

- **Diane, how big is the problem of dual or multiple exceptionalities?**

I'll take an example. Dyslexia is the most frequent problem that teachers want to know about and is also the most common of the learning disabilities or special needs after behavioural difficulties. Yet it is found in only 10 per cent of the school population and ranges from mild to a severe 4 per cent. This means that in an average classroom we can expect only one or two children to have dyslexic problems. ADHD and Asperger syndrome occur occasionally in a class. In the dyslexic group my studies show that about one third are in the higher ability range, that is, 2 or 3 pupils in an age cohort have dual exceptionality involving dyslexia. However, this is not what teachers experience: they have the feeling that many more pupils are doubly exceptional than this and I think they are right. There are pupils who have hidden or masked difficulties and these also depress their scores on IQ tests. The diagnostic tests for dyslexia etc. are also not always valid, as I have argued.

- **What do teachers need to know?**

I think they need to rely more on their own sensitive skills in diagnosis and look at two main outcomes or aspects in their diagnosis. These are Writing Skills and Language Skills. The concept map at the end of my chapter tries to illustrate this.

Language disadvantage and difficulties from whatever source will mask ability, as will an inability to write neatly, spell adequately, and write coherently. These occur despite the presence of good reasoning, problem-solving and creative abilities and lead to lower school grades. However, they can be overcome with the right kind of teaching.

My studies have shown that at least one third of children in most ordinary classrooms have such disabilities, and up to 80 per cent are underfunctioning to some degree. The National Standardised Ability test results (SATs) for example demonstrate the severe deficits in writing abilities of both boys and girls.

- **How do teachers and parents help those who are doubly exceptional?**

It follows from the diagnosis above that in schools and at home we must devote more time to speaking and listening and reflection upon experiences. In every school subject, instead of 80 per cent of classroom time being devoted to writing and producing copybooks or personal text books, it needs to be revised to incorporate the cognitive and talking curricula.

In the early years teachers need to be trained to focus more upon speaking, listening and cognitive skills than they currently do. The teaching of reading needs to be better balanced to incorporate spelling

and handwriting tuition on an individual and problem-solving basis rather than the copy-writing rote-training as is prevalent now. Emergent writing studies and the "Writing in the Air" project in Kent (UK) have led the way in this.

In addition the 'pupil voice' is a most important contribution to understanding the exceptionality and the needs. Pupils know only too well when a technique is not working for them and they need to be helped to formulate why, and how to communicate this in a reasonable way to the tutor/teacher.

Parents too can help their children especially by increasing the amount of quality talk time they have with their offspring, and by taking them on more educational visits, and by creating fun and education out of ordinary daily activities. Doing things together and discussing them is a good general basis, but they do not have to become teacher substitutes.

- **How do schools provide for doubly exceptional and how are they even first identified?**

Many of the most overt and severe difficulties will be identified before a child enters school. The Health Visitor, doctor or parents will refer the child for diagnosis and to obtain special help and support.

Educational difficulties and any precociousness will be observed in a child's first responses to the curriculum and general social context. The teacher will refer to the UK Code of Practice and other school guidance to aid a preliminary identification of any abilities and difficulties, and discuss them with the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), or person responsible for special needs provision. This

should involve ensuring that appropriate differentiation of the curriculum is made to support the child and progress and development are carefully monitored.

It may be found that extra support or provision is required from the school support staff to meet the needs. If this is not successful then outside help from expert advisers or tutors may be required (School Action Plus) and a statement of need is drawn up to secure additional financial support. Problems arise when this process needs short-circuiting and a child needs specialist support or assistive technology within a few weeks in school.

Problems also arise when a highly able child succeeds in compensating for a learning disability and performs at the level of peers but should be producing work of a much higher standard. This can lead to a great deal of frustration and distress that leaks out as emotional and behavioural difficulties or attentional problems. Therefore these should be regarded as signs of dissatisfaction and mismatch to need rather than hostility to school.

Disadvantaged learners frequently do not have the social and communicative skills to explain their problems and can respond aggressively. The SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) training materials are designed to help schools with this problem (DfEE, 2006).

- **Michael, how would you define 'a research community' and what kinds of resources does a school need?**

A research community or RC is simply an idea and at present it is still open to various interpretations. The essential component is that learners identify a real-life issue, a

common interest, or school or community problem that they want to investigate and possibly solve. No doubt at some stage someone will attempt to put dogma, boundaries and restrictions around RCs and to structure them, and that will sadly limit potential creativity to some extent. To me an RC is simply a gathering of imaginative individuals (mostly pupils) with a few shared values and aspirations. These hopefully will evolve from early and ongoing team-building exercises and the gaining of a research commission from someone like a headteacher who will also have something to say about the constitution, rights and responsibilities of a particular RC. Examples of the types of positive attributes and values that can be facilitative in a typical RC are located in Figure 5.1 on page 134 of the book. It is these and similar homegrown, owned and valued characteristics that define the identity of a RC. We would therefore expect RCs to vary considerably in constitution, purpose, outcomes, longevity, operational procedures, group size, frequency of meeting, membership, etc.

The resources required initially are very basic. The RC needs trust, authority, respect and a conspicuous investment by the senior management team (SMT) of a school. This means the SMT are onboard with informed understanding and a public commitment to support the RC. This requires the freeing up of one or two enthusiastic and hopefully passionate volunteer staff members who function as facilitators and who convene initial meetings at convenient times and in designated safe spaces within busy and crowded school environments. These are staff who are ideologically prepared to help young people to assume most of the work, the responsibility and the credit for the RC with a light touch of administrative control. The staff could be those with a keen interest

in groups of Gifted and Talented pupils, film-making and other media studies, journalism, student government, advocacy, student based research, problem or enquiry based learning, drama, experiential work, psychology, information technology, networked learning, performance, etc. The meeting and working space should be protected and suitable to the needs of the RC. Over time additional staff might volunteer to assist with technical tasks. There should be an agreement as to what to expect from the school clerical and administrative teams, the SMT, the library and the Information Technology (IT) staff. The RC should not be compromised by young people either expecting too much or too little from others in the school community. The wider school community should be kept informed as to what the RC is doing.

- **Michael, how does a school go about establishing a robust research community and what kinds of in-service training might teachers require?**

A good way to start would be to read about how various RCs have operated in other schools and perhaps to visit one and talk with both staff and students about how they got started, what helped and what hindered progress, how big an investment of time and resources was required, what was commissioned, what the RC has produced, how the findings of the RC were disseminated and the critically evaluated overall impact of the RC. If the responses to these queries feel encouraging, a small working group of staff and students could convene a meeting or two to examine preliminary proposals and assess enthusiasm, commitment and support that would be on the table from the beginning. If this is forthcoming the proposals could be formalized and a working timetable produced. If this is not forthcoming further

consultation and preparation is recommended.

Based upon past experience the volunteer adult staff have not required training specific to RCs but it helps for the work to be valued and to be recognized as a substantial contribution made to the school community. If staff volunteers feel they require additional resources and/or training this needs to be considered by the SMT. Ideally, the RC should be seen as an economic value-added facility with enormous potential to improve many aspects of the school. It would be one further way that the SMT could provide convincing evidence to governors, parents, Ofsted inspectors (Office for Standards in Education), etc. that school staff really listen to the voice of the child and that children's contributions are valued and respected. One outstanding performance indicator of quality gains from a RC is to see the RC members being awarded subsequent commissions to engage in further and perhaps more challenging on-site research.

- **Carrie , as a former teacher, I know that there are only so many hours in a week, and teachers have to cover the national curriculum. How can teachers go about providing challenging opportunities in the classroom?**

It's really about a change of approach and attitude rather than tacking things on to an already busy schedule. Often, more able children are exhorted to complete 'more of the same' once they have completed their set classroom-based tasks, and so they end up wasting a lot of time that could be put to good use. Many of them remain unchallenged by the typical curriculum diet. Challenging opportunities come in myriad shapes and forms since challenge is an individual concept. What's challenging for

one person may not be challenging for another, and so teachers really need to know and understand their pupils if they are to match tasks and activities effectively, to provide genuine challenge.

Of the different ways to provide challenge, teachers can select from an array of 'ingredients' or types of activities as suits their pupils. For example, introducing novelty or variety can refresh a classroom-based task through exposing children to a new idea, approach or perhaps using a novel context such as a museum, gallery, science centre or even simply a different site on the school campus. Pupils also benefit from directing their own projects where possible. Through allowing them increased independence in choosing their areas and methods of study, children tend towards challenging activities and are able to maintain high levels of motivation.

In school, pupils are learning alongside age peers and it is obviously vital that they learn to communicate appropriately. However, more able pupils also need to spend time with like-minded peers who are often a different age (usually older) in order to pursue their interests and ideas in depth. Mixing up the social groups helps to increase challenge. Similarly, many of the tasks undertaken by high achieving able children carry no risk of failure. If learners habitually succeed at all they do, they can become blasé about learning, or develop negative perfectionist tendencies, or they can just switch off through boredom.

All of these tactics or ingredients of challenge also relate to cognitive engagement. Challenging tasks demand our engagement and those that leave us cold or don't pique our interest are usually wrongly pitched; they are too easy or too hard. None of them require additional curriculum time.

Incorporating challenge is about adjusting tasks to account for children's existing abilities, habits, interests and propensities - and then jolting (or luring) them out of their comfort zone.

- **What are these challenging opportunities? Are you talking about higher order thinking skills, problem-solving and thinking skills, scientific experiments, peer tutoring or computer-based research?**

My, you mention a lot of ideas there! All of them could be challenging but some of them, done poorly, could lack challenge just as readily as drill exercises in maths or English. Other than high level thinking (which by definition is challenging), it's impossible to describe a task as intrinsically challenging; the person setting the task must understand the learner's level and interests. Certainly problem-solving is usually engaging; generally the relationship between problem-solving and genuine, meaningful concerns does heighten the potential for challenge. Scientific experiments, peer-tutoring and computer-based research can all be endlessly challenging, but could also be dreary and simplistic.

Challenge can be found in any curriculum subject and in a broad range of activities, including physical ones, not just intellectual pursuits. I would suggest that the key principles would be to do with thinking and questioning; these need to be high level and well-matched to abilities for activities to be challenging. The ingredients I mention above are different ways to approach challenge and can be selected once the learners' needs and experiences have been established.

So many other tasks and subjects could feature in your list, for example music,

environmental issues, and certainly philosophy often comes up as a great way to expose children to deeply challenging ideas that seem to have no clear consensus - that's got to count as real challenge! I would not pin down challenge as universally related to one subject over another, although some researchers do argue for this viewpoint. Possibly features of some disciplines might make them more challenging, for example those that incorporate more abstract ideas, or those that really impact deeply on culture. But even given these ways of thinking about challenge, who is to say that physics outstrips music, or Latin beats art as being the most challenging for the most people?

It's the same with tasks; it's not easy to guarantee what would be the most difficult. Just think for a moment about the pros and cons of working alone and with colleagues. Each way of working has its difficulties and its advantages and it depends a great deal on what needs doing, who the other people are and why you might be thrown or drawn together in the first place. Peer tutoring, for example, is subject to all these vagaries.

Fundamentally, I think it is useful for teachers to engage with the concept and practice of challenge in order to facilitate the most appropriate task-setting they can for the learners in their care.

- **Belle, as a final question, I must say that this book is chock full of robust ideas and information. Could you briefly summarise the main purposes of the book?**

The main purpose throughout the book is to present practical, tried and tested strategies for ensuring that *all* learners are given the opportunity to discover and develop their potential. The ethos of the 12 case-study schools is that of inclusion with differentiation of curriculum activities according to interests and abilities.

Far too often government initiatives in the past have resulted in the over-emphasis on testing and right-answer scores. Hence, the intention of the book is to remind ourselves of why we entered the teaching profession in the first place. Didn't we want to practise the following ideals?

- The development of learners' ownership of their learning through the negotiation of relevant problems to be solved in relation to real-life learning and understanding;
- The development of constructive dialogue and interaction in the learning/teaching dynamic with reciprocity and equality of teachers and learners as jointly negotiating and constructing meaning;
- The development of learners' self-confidence and independence in decision-making and actions leading to their self-actualisation.

We wanted to assure good teachers that they are intuitively aware of how learners can best learn, and consequently, how they can best teach. We also wanted to affirm that good, creative teachers are socially and emotionally 'gifted' in the real sense that they *do* understand the needs of learners and, if given the creative freedom to develop their professional expertise, they become experts within their profession.

As a profession, we intuitively know that:

- When learners' motivation is high, they are confident to take risks with expressing creative ideas, however tentative that expression may be;
- When learners have high self-confidence and good self-image, they are more open to accepting adaptations to their everyday life-styles, taking on new roles

with high expectations of themselves;

- Low levels of personal and classroom anxieties are indispensable for learners to make progress.

We also know that:

- Learners develop language and cognitive skills through purposeful real-life situations that provide them with authentic and meaningful contexts for learning;
- Learning to think and talk effectively are active processes. It is not possible to 'do language and thinking to learners', they must do it for themselves.

Fortunately, the current 'buzz' words in the UK are 'personalised and independent learning, learner decision-making and ownership, children as researchers, out-of-hours and off-site learning'. And many schools are rejoicing in the freedom this gives to develop new modes of classroom interaction and school organisation. The case-studies of 12 schools, undoubtedly, are typical of many similarly good schools, and it has been a joy and a privilege, to have been made so welcome in the these particular schools that have been so honest in the sharing and appraisal of their practices. It is also a privilege to be able to share and reflect on strategies for best practice with you, the reader, who will, undoubtedly, identify with the ideas shared within this text.

NOTE: A summary of the research that has evolved into the full-length text discussed here is published by the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE. 2007) (in conjunction with London Gifted and Talented) entitled: *Raising the Achievement of Able, Gifted and Talented Pupils within an inclusive school framework*. Copies of the summary can be obtained from publications@nace.co.uk