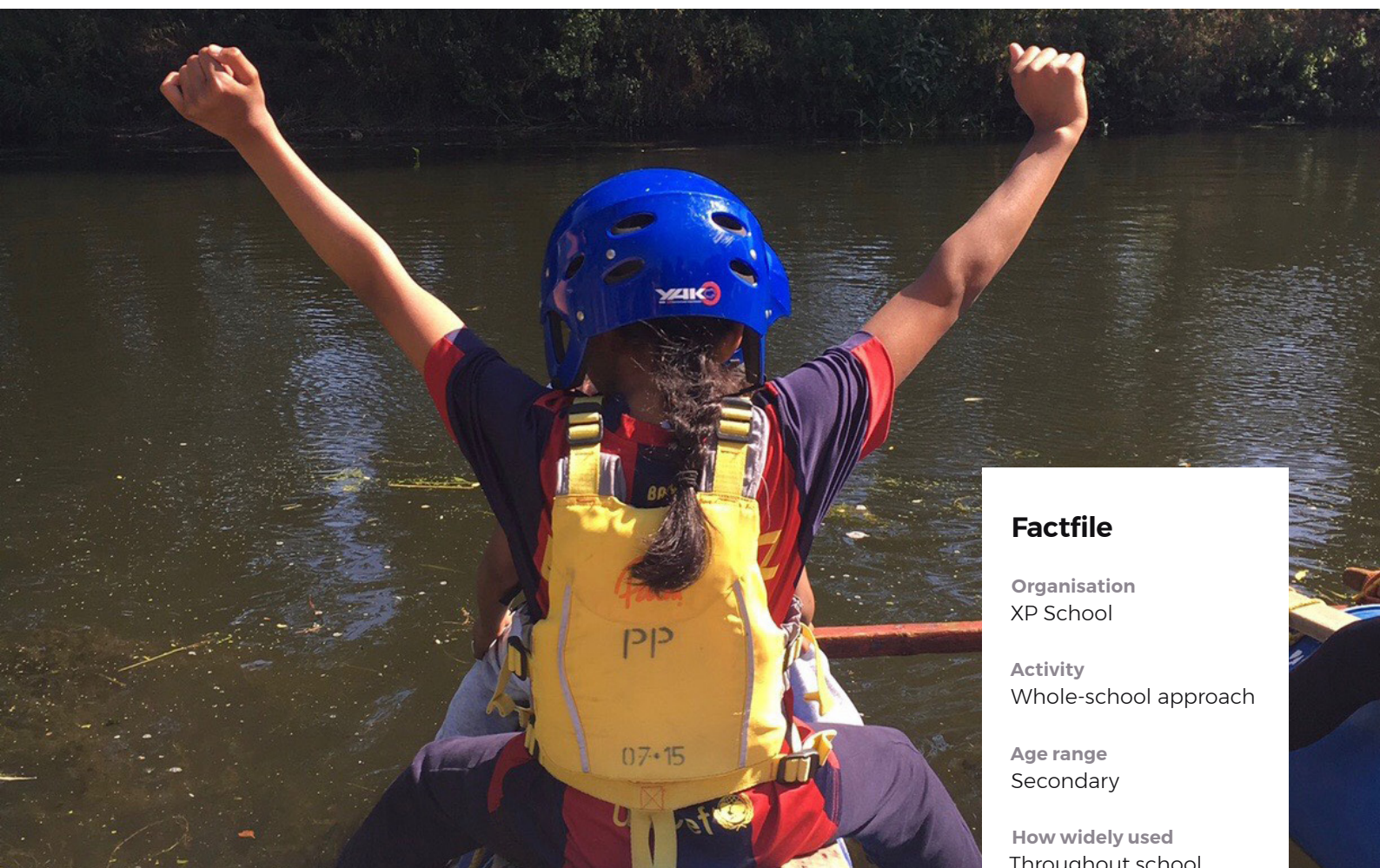


Putting relationships first in a whole-school approach



Factfile

Organisation
XP School

Activity
Whole-school approach

Age range
Secondary

How widely used
Throughout school

In Doncaster, students are making substantial academic progress thanks to a radical whole-school approach to relational skills that prepares them for learning and life.

It's not often that Ofsted judges a school 'outstanding' in every area. But XP is no ordinary school. As you approach the building, a bold orange logo proclaims that you have reached your destination, and this strong identity runs through the school. Teachers talk about 'how we do things around here'. Wherever you are in the school, you cannot forget where you are, and relationships are at the heart of this identity. This is not just branding for its own sake, explains Headteacher Andy Sprakes, 'We have a shared common language that is really identifiable.'

The school, which opened five years ago, was conceived on design principles, which means that nothing is done without careful thought about its impact. At the heart of this is an ethos 'that students grow academically, but they also grow their character'. The approach may be unorthodox but seems to be a recipe for success, with morale extremely high among staff and children alike.

The fundamental building block of school life is 'crew' – a 'family' of around 12 children from the same year group and one adult leader, who will stay



I went to three or four schools before this one, and you don't really have a voice. I was bullied and I told the teacher, but they did nothing. Here, you say a problem and then we have a huge community meeting about it and it gets solved. It's like, everyone is a team instead of you being alone.

together throughout their time at the school. It is a safe space where they can explore feelings and reflect on progress. Week one for new year 7s consists of an outward-bound expedition to bond as a crew group and experience practical challenges that teachers can use as analogies to support the children throughout their education. ('Remember when your crew carried you up the mountain? Well, we can help you with this too.')

There is a strong emphasis on personal accountability. The school comes together in a weekly community meeting, where a microphone is passed around a central space designed as a gathering point for the community. The meeting allows staff and students to make announcements, with a focus on apologies and appreciations. Children voluntarily speak out to thank their friends or teachers, or to acknowledge mistakes they have made ('Sorry to my class and my teacher that I was silly in PE last week.') and pledging to try harder.

The focus on accountability extends to teachers too, who begin an intensive induction the June before they start work in September. 'In five years, we've never paid for cover because we look after each other - we're crew,' says Andy. Teacher meetings follow the crew session structure, including appreciations and apologies. 'We see teachers as learners too. We have a culture of reflecting on, critiquing and tuning our pedagogy. And again, because of that sense of crew, there's high challenge here; we're held to account by each other. Everything we're doing is for the students and for each other, to ensure that we all grow,' Andy

explains. Parents are included from the beginning. At XP the staff work hard to give them a say and honest feedback.

Gwyn ap Harri, the school's Chief Executive, says, 'We have a transition process where we go out to every school that will be sending in kids. We talk to the kids in that setting. We talk to the teachers and we talk to parents. The parents can comment, and we set expectations. We work really hard to include them and we're really good at communicating with parents. We admit when we've done something wrong. We have the highest attendance in Doncaster, the lowest exclusion rate in Doncaster. These are the outcomes.'

Julie chose the school for her son, Tom, as she thought the different approach would suit him. From the beginning, she was impressed at how involved the school made her feel. She is confident that when students report any concerns, community meetings take place and issues get resolved, so students feel relaxed and secure in a learning environment that helps put things right.

Julie says, 'They would ring home, which I found impressive. They would just ring to say Tom is doing fine. He's doing this, this and this, and this month we're going to be concentrating on whatever. They get to know the parents and the child. And they'll notice if there's anything not quite right and how that person ticks.'

Julie started volunteering at the school and now works there. She says the way XP approaches relationships education has even made her reflect on how she does things at home.

Learning points

Carefully chosen language can help embed culture.

Design principles can help create an ambitious vision that goes beyond the norm.

Daily sessions with 'crew' help young people feel safe and work through problems so they are better able to engage with the wider school community.

By investing in a strong relationship and regular communications from the beginning, the school can establish a relationship of trust that inspires parent confidence and openness.