



Where Are My Sparkles? My “Kagan Journey”

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Rathor, M. Where Are My Sparkles? San Clemente, CA: Kagan Publishing. Kagan Online Magazine, Winter 2014. www.KaganOnline.com

I first heard of Kagan when I was an NQT (a Newly Qualified Teacher—a label teachers in the UK receive who have been qualified for fewer than twelve months). I lived across the hills from a local school in Cheshire that people knew, through its reputation, had revolutionised learning and improved results ([Fallibroome Academy](#)). The rumour was that this had been done with Kagan Structures. At the time, I knew nothing of what this was—it sounded like something deeply psychological and a little scary... so I was intrigued.



Sometime later, after 3 years of teaching, I moved from a very middle class school in the Peak District to an inner city school in Manchester. At the time, it was one of the lowest performing schools in the country and the pupils were “challenging” to say the least. In this environment, I had to work very much harder to engage the pupils and help them to achieve their target grades at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education). I had a toolkit, but it soon started to rust, so I needed to try a new tactic.

It was then that I researched Kagan and I found that, actually, it wasn't really anything at all daunting. The ideas behind the practice seemed to make a great deal of practical sense. So, I booked to go onto the two day course for beginners.

I can honestly say that this was a turning point for my career and for the pupils that I taught.

It is fair to say that I was a convert within two hours of going to [Gavin's](#) training. I have been a trainer myself (prior to teaching) and I am rarely enthused by other people's delivery; certainly rarely excited! But, watching Gavin's delivery, feeling the structures myself, and working with the PIES principles, I was submerged in the possibilities of revolutionising my classroom.

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Initially, I decided to trial Kagan Structures with my year 7 bottom set, as they were a class that were operating below level 4 and I needed to accelerate their progress in literacy. I can honestly

say that I was fearful of allowing the class to leave their seats; despite the fact that one of the major appeals of the Kagan Structures was that it was going to help them to build their social skills. At this time, the social skills with this vibrant group were seriously lacking! Allowing them to walk around the room to music, gearing up for a RallyRobin, was fearful (to say the least). These initial “walks” were more like gallops and were a little frenzied. However, with training and perseverance, the pupils started to enjoy the opportunities and started to treat them as part of a process. I wrote a whole scheme of work, based on the PIES principles that featured The Gruffolo. This included Quiz-Quiz-Trade, Find-the-Fiction, Think-Pair-Share, RallyRobin, and a couple of other structures. I even tried to bring in praise and cheers more, and most of the class relished the learning environment.

When I say most, one particular boy clearly didn't.

He didn't want to do anything with his classmates. He didn't want to take part in any teambuilding or classbuilding activities. He didn't want to talk or share anything with anyone. So, I did as advised by Gavin and made an island out of him.

He wasn't an island for very long.

As he saw the fun that learning could be and the engagement of cooperative learning, he (slowly but surely) came back to the class. I will always remember vividly how we used to use sparkles as a praising cheer and he would scoff, saying it was “stupid and pathetic.” Until the day that he answered a really taxing question in class and, knowing his feelings about the cheers, I didn't encourage the class to praise him. His response to this was, “Whoa! Where are my sparkles?” He seemed to grow at least ten metres taller when the class cheered him and I think that, “where are my sparkles?” is a great mantra for Kagan Structures; as to me, it's all about adding the extra bits to learning that we don't always think about.



I soon embedded Kagan Structures into all of my classes and, within months, I was confidently planning lessons that used a variety of structures and pupils were becoming much more accountable for their learning in class. My results started to improve further and I became an advocate of mixed ability teams and cooperative learning, using the PIES principles to underpin all of my differentiation. As I taught all English intervention groups, the English GCSE results grew from 33% to 70% over a four year period; more than doubling in number and this helped the school to stand out as one of the most improved in the country.

I was frequently approached by other teachers who wanted to observe my practice, as pupils were saying how much they enjoyed their lessons and teachers in school started to copy what I was doing. However, they were doing this without formal training and I was concerned that the structures could become diluted. It was for that reason that I continued to study as a Kagan practitioner, in order to become a school trainer as, by this time, I was well aware of the power of Kagan.

I completed my training as a Kagan School Trainer over a year ago now and I have embedded Kagan into all of our training packages. We are not a Kagan school... yet! But, we are getting there! I started training the staff by converting the rest of our English team and Kagan is now embedded in all lessons in English, throughout both key stages. I then travelled to Geography and History and now Kagan is embedded there too. As I am responsible for all eight newly qualified teachers in the school, these teachers are expected to use Kagan Structures in their lessons and they are my Kagan Ambassadors in other departments. I have trained all teachers on the basic principles and all of the training that I do, whether in school or out of it, is structured with Kagan. If I deliver "Assessment for Learning" or "Effective Questioning Techniques" training, I use the structures because I truly believe in them.

Kagan Structures has changed the dynamics of my classroom; it has changed the way that I, and many of my colleagues, deliver lessons but... and this is far far more important... it has changed the way that many pupils have learnt.

When I started on my Kagan journey, I was a teacher at Our Lady's High School in Blackley, Manchester and I was in my fourth year of practice. Within a year, I was promoted and accredited as an Advanced Skills Teacher. I was then asked to go into schools all over Manchester to support English teaching and learning and I did this one day a week for two years, whilst still teaching at my own school. During that time, I "sold" all of the benefits of Kagan to any teachers that I coached and supported. During this period, I also completed my Kagan training and I went on to qualify as a Kagan School Trainer. I was then promoted again to "Director of Teaching and Learning" in my school.

My most recent accolade was when I was approached by the Times Education Supplement (TES) - the largest international educational news based forum for teachers - and asked for my views on mixed ability teaching. They published an article that covered the basics of Kagan. Some weeks later, I was nominated – then shortlisted – for the TES award for "Most Inspirational Teacher Of The Year".

To say that Kagan Structures has changed the way that I teach would be a massive understatement. Kagan Structures has changed the dynamics of my classroom; it has changed the way that I, and many of my colleagues, deliver lessons but... and this is far far more important... it has changed the way that many pupils have learnt. It has given literally hundreds of pupils a new enjoyment of learning. My pupils live in one of the most deprived areas of the country, where competition for jobs is fierce, and hundreds more of them now have a GCSE grade C in English. Doors have been opened to them and their life chances are considerably much more improved. So, if I'm ever asked again, "where are my sparkles?" I'll only need to look on the faces of my year 11s when they come into school to pick up their exam results. Because their faces literally sparkle and that's what every teacher lives for!