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# Teaching and the Individuality of Everybody

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents a study in which the author researched her own practice as the teacher of a reception class in a large primary school in England. The research focussed on the challenge of articulating what was tacitly or intuitively known: how, and why, the myriad of choices and decisions of which teaching is constituted could be made and justified. The author considers the significance of the class as a community; the relationship between everybody and children as individuals. A consistent and coherent principled stance was identified, articulated in terms of attention to imagination. The article discusses the significance of this as the means by which the individuality of everybody could be perceived.

## **Stepping Up – being a teacher**

This is a story about the joyful, and occasionally baffling, business of being a teacher and the serious business of being four and five years old (and the points in between). The setting is 'Reception L'. *Reception* because that is the name commonly attributed to children's first year in school. *L* because it is the initial of my surname and I was the teacher of this class. The class was part of a large primary school, a low-lying 1960s build, tucked at the back of a cul-de-sac in a small city in England. We had a very small classroom and access to lots of outside space. The characters are the children who were in my class during the academic year of 2006-7. They were the motivation for my study and the focus of all my attention. This article presents the outcomes from the endeavour of researching my own practice; what I learnt about what I knew.

I started my research with the problem that is likely to be a feeling familiar to class teachers: I knew that I was everybody's teacher; I knew that everybody was different. I knew that I did not need to individualise the curriculum or my teaching, or sort the children into groups of 'most' and 'some' based around an abstracted notion of a 'normal child' in order to best enable

and support their children's learning. But, I could not explain *why*. I could not explain what it meant to be everybody's teacher, or why *everybody* was so important.

I had become increasingly aware of the limitations, and associated frustrations, of much of the political rhetoric of education policy and practice at the time. As teachers we were reminded that 'every child matters' (DfES, 2003). However, a closer reading betrayed the government's concern to protect every adult in the making, rather than every child. The language of vulnerability, protection and correction, or 'early intervention' was being used to encourage us to focus on the need to prepare children, ensure their 'readiness', future-proof society by intervening in the lives of those who were most likely to fail to meet particular standards agenda. It was into this broader conversation about how to protect 'all our futures' through the education of our children that the 'standards' and a focus on educational outcomes gained momentum. A failure to thrive, be healthy, or happy, had become associated in the minds of some with a threat to outcomes of learning.

For my class these expectations were defined in terms of the 'Early Learning Goals' (QCA, 2000). There were 117 statements, organised into six 'areas of learning', that articulated where 'most children will be' at the end of their reception year, against which every child was statutorily assessed. The policy was criticised for being overly complicated and arduous (Wragg, 2003). Nevertheless, however excessive the tick-boxes of the 'Foundation Stage Profile' may have seemed, I knew they did not come close to representing what I knew about each child and their learning.

I also knew that while the Foundation Stage Profile was not even slightly interested in everybody in Reception L as a community, everybody mattered. Everybody made a difference to everybody else. I had become increasingly interested in and inspired by examples of teaching and learning that recognised the importance of communities where being kind, gracious, curious and surprising were prized: Moss and Petrie's (2002) concept of schools as civic spaces; the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006); Paley's (1993, 1999) stories of her kindergarten classes; and *Learning without Limits* (Hart et al, 2004): a study of teachers who resisted pedagogical predicting, sorting and sifting, in favour of practice founded on the principles of co-agency, everybody and trust. These examples became my ballast as I navigated my way through the complexity of practice, and the constraints of tacit and intuitive knowledge and understanding, towards an articulation of what it meant to be the teacher of everybody in Reception L. This is a story of how and why I attended to the children's footsteps, not the stepping-stones.

### **Stepping Inside – where did we start?**

At any one time, there were usually thirty children and between two and six adults working in Reception L. Our day was divided into two sessions of two and a half hours each – intentionally long stretches of time in which we could

get 'stuck in', and only had to stop and tidy up when absolutely necessary. As the class teacher I did conform to the expectation to plan for children's learning, and used this as an opportunity to think seriously about how I might extend their encounters with the world. However, there was always time and space every day for the children's own and collective imaginations and ambitions. Therefore, what we actually did was negotiated as a class. Individual acts of deciding what to do next became embedded in a cyclical process of making choices, collaborating and reflecting on each other's learning.

Over the course of the year, a web of expected and unexpected opportunities for learning were encountered and all evolved in different ways. Sometimes a thread of an idea might last just a few moments for one or two children. Sometimes a small idea would grow in influence and significance over time. Some themes included everybody at some point, although all themes revealed that everybody learns in different ways. For example, the theme of Pirates started in September as a whole class experience when we read *Captain Flinn and the Pirate Dinosaurs* (Andrae & Ayto, 2005), followed a treasure map, and made our own book 'Captain Flinn and the Pirate Children of Reception L'. Five months later, on a particularly cold and foggy morning that followed the children finding 'new treasure' (stepping stones) in the playground, I introduced two cardboard chests containing pirate clothes, cutlasses, daggers and money-bags. This act had a transformative effect beyond all our imaginations. Their play was no longer about learning from Captain Flinn about Pirates; it was about *being* a real Pirate.

The children who chose to be real Pirates were highly motivated and deeply involved in their learning. Their games were complex and impressively imaginative. They constructed elaborate Pirate ships with cannon and planks to be walked. They spent hours poring over books and pictures for details that they would incorporate into their future games. But Pirates didn't make for easy members of a learning community: they were fierce, rebellious, took hostages, hid treasure, brandished swords. The Pirates were subversive, un-cooperative, and whilst unflinchingly loyal to each other – their team – they were ruthlessly dismissive of everyone else. At times, it felt like we were under siege. Meanwhile other choices were being made – the Pirates lived alongside beans being planted, porridge being cooked and eaten, postcards being written and sent to Grandma, and investigations into mud inspired by the work of the artist Richard Long. As everybody's teacher, I worked to make sense of this complexity and wanted to more fully understand the significance of the choosing, collaborating and reflecting that was being undertaken within my class.

### **Stepping Forward – what did we do?**

Early in the year I could see evidence of the children's capacity to influence each other's learning in ways that would extend their own. Over the course of one week, what began as a simple exploratory game of dribbling water onto

asphalt became transformed into experimenting with intentional movement (spinning) to draw circles, and finally developed into extreme firefighting. Episodes such as this became significant as evidence of what individual children were learning and how they were noticing each other; how they were extending each other's understanding of what might be possible and imagining things they might like to do, or be.

Over time, as the children became more secure in their friendships with each other, and their activities grew in scope and sophistication, so the significance of participation increased. A conversation with children in my class (who chose their own pseudonyms) recorded in my journal illustrates how, on a day when Will was absent from school, it became clear that physical absence was not a barrier to inclusion.

Will's name had had to be added to the list of people playing pirates, at Agent J's insistence, when we were planning on the board. 'So that he will be ready for yesterday'. 'Yeah, and Will'.

His name, and the subject of his absence, but inclusion and presence, came up in conversation again.

Agent J to me: You can be invisible Will. You will have to dress up as a boy and then you can be Will.

Holly: Well I am wearing blue trousers and a white t-shirt so that will probably be ok.

Agent J: But you will have to tie your hair. It is too all long.

Holly: Can't pirates have long hair?

THF: Yes they can. They do. There are pirates with long hair, I know there are.

Agent J: Yes I know, but you can't. Because of ... because of ...

Holly: Because Will does not have long hair?

Agent J: Yes

THF: Yes. Will does not have long hair. But pirates do.

*Extract from journal, Summer 1, week 6.*

The children's capacity to notice each other, and be respectful towards each other, was essential if I was to create a sense of community for everybody within the class and, while there were success stories, such as Will being remembered, there were also numerous occasions when I felt called to make a decision but struggled to decide what to do. Many of these moments were concentrated into the few weeks that we lived with Pirates. The enthusiasm that had been so powerful in uniting and motivating everybody also threatened what we had gained, testing the trusting relationships and dividing the class.

Holly: Sometimes you play really great games. Your ideas are always fantastic. You have brilliant games. But we have this real problem that you are mean to some children. And I can't let that happen. [That's my job,] is to make sure that that does not happen.

...

Agent J: [But Pirates] But we are trying to be real Pirates.

Holly: I know you are. And I think that that is part of the problem. And I don't know, we have to find a solution to that because otherwise I am just going to have to say 'no pirates'. If it's because Pirates are in gangs, and Pirates have enemies, that means that you have to be mean to other people we'll just have to say 'no more Pirates'; because we can't have people being mean to each other at school. So if you really, really, really want to play Pirates, you have to show me that you can find a way to be really kind to everybody and play Pirates.

I think that we can do that if you think hard about how Pirates know all about maps and all about where all of the countries are in the world and things like that.

[four second silence]

I think that we could find a Pirate story that's not about being mean to people, it's about finding treasure.

Agent J: [mumbled something like 'alright'].

*Transcript of audio-recording, Summer 1, week 5.*

The strong sense of belonging the Pirates had discovered was both a strength of, and a threat to, our community. The relationships I wanted to encourage were entwined with behaviour I needed to discourage. As I became more aware of what could be lost or ruined by coercion, so I became more aware of what we had and what might be, the depths of Hart et al's (2004) insight that 'nothing's neutral', and that we had to act together. I worked hard to resist the temptation to put all the pirate clothes back in the cupboard, and the decision paid off. The Pirates started to take up and develop alternative opportunities for learning, and there was a gradual turning away until eventually the chests had been left untouched for long enough that I was convinced that to put them away would not be undermining the children's choices. This unnoticed act, which could be thought to signify a turning point, represented how uneventful the transitions seemed – there were no fanfares, just an accumulation of small acts of noticing that things were no longer as they had been.

The episodes of struggling with Pirates, where I needed to protect what was most valuable to our community, led me to notice how the children had become increasingly confident about articulating the principles that I had introduced, frequently impressing me with their command of the principled concepts, such as coagency, everybody, and trust (Hart et al, 2004) and what they meant for our learning community. There was a discernable shared sense of purpose, which I was sharply reminded of in a moment of pedagogical forgetfulness during a handwriting lesson.

In the afternoon we did handwriting – we wrote out the whole alphabet. They all have a good sense of what the alphabet is, and are proud that we know it all, and I wanted them to have a strong feeling of 'look how brilliant we are that we can do all this' – learning how to spell CVC words does not give the same sense of

achievement. At one point I drew attention to Amy's board which had the alphabet so far written out very neatly. As I held it up saying 'I really want to show you how clever you are all getting, look how brilliant Amy's writing is ...' Amy said 'I think that Vanessa's is really good'.

This was the most perfect wake-up call. In terms of effort allocation Amy was probably quite right in highlighting the endeavours of her friend, and Vanessa certainly looked much cheered by the vote of confidence. From that point on, intermittently all of the children held up their boards so that everyone could see their brilliant writing.

*Journal extract.*

In that moment of great generosity towards her friend Amy I had focused on the outcome rather than the purpose of the activity. In this task of *developing* mastery of a skill, Vanessa had proved herself to be every bit as successful as Amy was. I had been distracted by the fact that Amy's work achieved a 'stepping stone', and Vanessa's did not. Moreover, using the stepping-stones as a measure of achievement did not give me sufficient pedagogical knowledge and understanding about the learning that was or was not taking place to inform good teaching. Amy's comments felt searing because I knew that I knew this: I knew that I knew how their handwriting had been developing; how easy they were or were not finding it to master the skills of controlling a pen; and why it ought to have been their efforts that I was rewarding, because it was this progress that was critical to mastery. What mattered, and what I should have been 'praising', was how each child's engagement in the activity was illuminating the absolutely unique and individual patterns to their progress, which do communicate what is being learnt and how. The focus of my attention should have been their footprints, not the stepping-stones they momentarily stood on.

Later in the year the children again showed me how they had a deep respect for each other, and what this meant in terms of the relationships within our community and the necessary interdependence between teaching and learning, as the following journal extract shows:

Brilliant conversation about Edward – who had knocked down the children's fantastic castles whilst we were in assembly & music ...

Agent J: 'Why couldn't you have protected them for us? You should have stopped him'.

Rosalinda: 'We need to help Edward learn how to build models so that he does not want to break ours'

THEY ARE BLOODY BRILLIANT ... I don't feel pride in myself at this moment, (there is no sense in which I think 'ha, that is what I wanted you to say') I do feel IMMENSELY proud of them, and in that sense I suppose I feel proud that I have given them the time and the space to be the loving generous people that they

intuitively are. They put me to shame with my proposal that Edward should not be allowed in the classroom while we are in assembly.

For the rest of the morning Edward continued to knock over their towers, and they patiently, and so bravely, worked to rebuild them time and time again.

I know that I cannot teach Edward without them. They know this too. We are a team.

*Extract from journal. Summer 2, week 5.*

### **Stepping Back – what did I see?**

The problem that I set out with –how to explain what it meant to be everybody’s teacher – was resolved in practice through numerous concerted efforts to establish a community. While at first sight the daily practices of Reception L may seem diverse and varied, the principles that underpinned how and why choices and decisions were made were coherent and consistent. These principles were all-important – they guided the choices and decisions we made and encouraged us to extend our imaginations in our search for what was possible.

My initial interest in *everybody*, and how to resolve responding to diversity without segregating communities, became increasingly tied to a broader question of ‘why are children important?’. While I had been distracting myself with the significance of the past, present and future, I had the foresight to ask Anna. She did not hesitate in her response. ‘Because their Mums and Dads love them’. Philosopher Raymond Gaita (2002, 2004) wrote about the preciousness of humanity, and the importance of individuality. Gaita argued that the individuality expressed when we say that each human being is unique and irreplaceable can never be conveyed by appealing to individual features.

It does not show itself in the celebration of difference, but in our unfathomable need for particular human beings. The celebration of difference can appeal to reason and to morality or it can offend them. It depends on the differences that are celebrated. But the irreplaceability of human beings in our affections and attachments, without reason or merit, has offended rationalists and moralists since the dawn of time. (Gaita, 2004, p. 76)

Applying this argument to a consideration of how children’s humanity can be recognised, it seems reasonable to assume that children will be particularly important in the ‘affections and attachments’ of particular people (and vice versa), such as the relationship of parent–child. The individuality that marks our humanity is not to be understood as irreplaceable to us in the relative sense of ‘sentimental value’ that might be attributed to a ring or a book given to us by a particular person (2004, p. 79), but as essential. It is this distinctive individuality that is referred to when someone is described as precious. We perceive each

other as having unique and irreplaceable individuality when we are *in* relationships, and not as a result of any documentation or declarations of difference. This kind of individuality is not an objective feature; it is fundamentally different from individuating characteristics and features that may be referred to as 'differences'.

To be everybody's teacher was to be tasked with the responsibility of paying attention to everybody's individuality. The best expression I found of the necessity of the constancy of my pedagogical striving, and how and why this was connected to the ways in which I worked to craft the community, was Murdoch's (1970) use of Weil's notion of *loving attention* in her argument for the sovereignty of Good. Although Weil's conception of education is theocentric, it enables the connections to be made between what is precious and the individuality of everybody, and how this can be known.

As Soskice (2007) explains, Murdoch uses love as a central concept in morals to express her belief that to be fully human and moral is to respond to that which demands or compels our response –to attend to the other with love. Following this, children are the ultimate example of what is 'thought of as knowable by love' (Murdoch, 1970, p. 40). Soskice elaborates on what Weil's notion of loving attention, and Murdoch's use of it, enables us to recognise:

Attending to the child is a work of imagination and moral effort. 'The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are "looking", making those little peering efforts of the imagination which have such important cumulative results' (Murdoch, 1979, p. 43). The object of attention is not a changeless truth so much as a moving target. Children are creatures of change and chance, and an attentive gaze on the real in their case is a gaze on a changing reality. (Soskice, 2007, p. 32)

With loving attention comes care, pride, self-consciousness, hope, ambition and perseverance, and it is because of loving attention that we can achieve good with the cumulative effects of the things we do.

It is what lies behind and in between actions and prompts them that is important ... *By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act.* (Murdoch, 1970, p. 67, emphasis added)

The problems with Pirates had not been resolved on a particular day, or by a particular person, or because of a particular choice or decision. Rather, we had all moved forwards through our 'turning away from the particular' (Murdoch, 1970). However, I did need to open out possibilities, and craft spaces, for the community to move forwards in new ways, with a stronger sense of what was good about Reception L. This process did not depend on individuals' attainment of particular outcomes or their meeting specific expectations for development. Rather, I worked to express my principled pedagogical



commitment to create an inclusive environment that would nurture children's individuality, and an ambition articulated by Smith:

In the attentiveness of good practical judgement, its sensitivity, flexibility and attunement to experience, perhaps there lies the possibility of doing justice to the diversity of particulars in our homogenising world, characterised as it is by relentless standardisation, frequently in the name of educational standards. (Smith, 1999, p. 336)

From such a point, I could see that the possibility to do good lay in the attentiveness of my pedagogy, and that such a process could be expressed through the idea of *attentiveness to imagination*. The concept of imagination recognizes how past, present and future are interconnected and embodied – imaginations belong to people who live in communities. Attentiveness to imagination was the means by which I could perceive the individuality of everybody. Through attending to what my class revealed about their imaginations I could make and justify the many choices and decisions on which my work depended.

### **Footsteps not Stepping Stones: what did I learn about what I knew?**

Teachers will always need to resolve the question 'what's next?'. As the example of Amy, Vanessa and their handwriting illustrated, we navigate routes through pre-existing curricula and expected outcomes as well as communities of people. To avoid the catastrophic effects of limiting imaginations, the challenge is to articulate how (and why) we can (and must) be determined for the people we teach, not determine what they will learn. I found that the language of ethics and morality was helpful in this endeavour. It reminds us of the importance of our common humanity (Gaita, 2002), and the importance of being and becoming *good*. The conversation does not shy away from the fact that the effort required will be huge; that there will be struggles, and perhaps wars, with baddies; that success will not be found in grand moment or gestures, but in the constancy with which we will continue to attend to each other. Through the practice of learning in communities we can and must perceive each others' unique and irreplaceability in our own affections and imaginations.

Through researching my own practice, I learnt that I knew that the community of the class did not simply provide the *context* for teaching and learning and the recognition of everybody's individuality. It was *necessary*. I learnt what the children showed me: that their full humanity – their being and their becoming – can only be perceived through understanding the significance of their belonging with and to others. Moreover, I learnt that without this sense of the purposefulness of why we belong, our shared humanity, the unique and irreplaceability of each other and ourselves, we impoverish our own work as

teachers and forget what is most important about the people with whom we work – that they are loved.

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