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How We Teach: the start of a longer conversation

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ABSTRACT In this written conversation, the staff of a small rural school embark on an exploration of their developing pedagogies. They consider some of the sources of their individual theories and practice, and show how they work together to challenge and support each other. They acknowledge the community of adults and children to which they belong and from which their pedagogy grows. They explore the nature of relationships within this community of learners and consider how they might describe the knowledge that teachers need and develop in the course of their work. Throughout the conversation runs the thread of trust and the part it plays in releasing adults and children to work at the furthest limits of possibility.

Imagine a small rural primary school. There are 67 children on the roll, three teachers and an executive head (originally the teaching head for this school). The school serves an unexceptional, scattered rural community and is situated in a village with few notable features – to the extent that when we were planning the screenplay for the school's own version of *The Jolly Christmas Postman* (Ahlberg & Ahlberg, 1991), a key destination chosen by the children was the Egg Shed – a small wooden shed from which a local farmer and parent sells eggs.

Behind its Victorian brick walls, the school is alive with childhood and learning. Here is a community of learners that includes children and all adult staff, whatever their role; governors, who visit often; parents and volunteers. In this school, education is a joint enterprise, and the teachers see themselves in partnership, as teachers and learners. It is entirely commonplace in this setting that the conversation frequently revolves around teaching and learning. Teaching is understood as dynamic and interactive and, for this reason, such conversations are essential. As teachers work from moment to moment balancing the expectations of the curriculum with their understandings of each

child in their care, their work is strengthened by their evolving sense of their own and shared pedagogies.

The school has a head teacher who believes in trusting teachers, though he admits that it is not always easy. There are many external pressures. The three teachers have, however, grown in the context he has created with them. As they grow, the mutual trust becomes greater. All three share ideas and work together in different ways, drawing on each other's strengths. They are both inspired and supported by each other. The context of this small school has allowed them to be adventurous. They have been able to test out their theories here. The expectations and values of the head teacher have accorded with their own understandings of children and of learning.

How have these teachers, with the head teacher, shaped their pedagogies? How do they continue to evolve? What follows is the start of a longer conversation which begins to explore such questions. Jenifer Smith who facilitates the conversation, is a governor at the school. The conversation began with the acknowledgement that all members of the group perceive themselves as lifelong learners who still love learning. It moved quickly to a consideration of how childhood experiences shaped everyone as learners and provided stories and experiences which inform the ways they each teach.

Paul Parslow-Williams: From a young age I could tell when I was being given 'busy work' by my teachers and resented having my time wasted. I was acutely aware that education was critical for my future. Whilst my family were always supportive, none of them had been educated beyond 16, and resources at home were limited. I always felt that there was a 'ticking clock' during my schooling and I knew that I needed to make the most of every opportunity in order to realise my ambitions.

Gemma Watts: I have very fond memories of primary school, some of which have shaped the way that I manage my own classroom. I remember enjoying writing from an early age, writing for pleasure and keeping notebooks, spy books and lists around the house. My memories of middle school are not so vivid. It was a more difficult time. I do remember a project I did about the Lake District, which is where we spent family holidays. I was able to illustrate it with our photographs and I felt I was an authority on the subject. I think it was the best piece of writing I did at that time because it meant so much to me.

Paul: A rather memorable lesson for me is one when I was seven years old. The teacher was asking me to compare the mass of objects using a top-pan balance and I was surprised when a feather weighed more than a stone. I later discovered that he had rigged the game by placing a large lump of modelling clay under the pan the feather was placed in. I do sometimes wonder if this experience was the catalyst that led to me later becoming a scientist! I also appreciated that many of my teachers celebrated knowledge. I was fanatical about the living world. David Attenborough's acclaimed *Life on Earth* was being

shown on television for the first time and I was captivated. I was fascinated by the evolutionary process, and my teachers took great delight in asking me to recite the ancestry of the horse or match dinosaurs to the correct geological eras.

Emily Rowe remembers times at primary school when the class worked in roles – as evacuees or as young Tudors when they visited Kentwell Hall. Her enthusiasm for such role play comes as no surprise. But she reflects that perhaps her love of learning is rooted in her family.

Jenifer: I think that was true for me, though, like Gemma and Zoe (Cole), I remember school projects that were significantly my own. Drama was important and the pleasure of hearing stories read aloud. My ideas were changed radically by the two schools where I first taught. In the first, I learned a different way of relating to children that demanded I truly listened to them and took them seriously. In the second, I learned how to work with individuals so that they became agents of their own learning.

I also learned the importance of talking with fellow teachers. Through talking with others who shared a knowledge of the same children and who were interested in teaching, I learned to make sense of what I was doing. There were also more experienced teachers who, as James Britton (1982, p. 214) puts it, helped me to 'theorise from [my] own experience, and build [my] own rationale and [my] own body of experience. For it is when [we] are actively theorising from [our] own experience that [we] can, selectively, take and use other people's experiences and other people's theories'. I think that is what is made possible in this school.

Paul: It is perhaps because of my experiences as a child that I feel passionately about the importance of teachers having great respect for children and their time. What we offer needs to be of the highest quality and rooted in the same good practice as we would expect from a medical professional. Lessons should have substantive content (in terms of knowledge gained and skills developed) and be presented in a way that is motivating and worthwhile. Teachers need to have the patience to slow down and focus on the experience of their pupils – as if they were the learners themselves.

Emily: I see my role not as the most powerful person in the classroom but as a more experienced learner and, in this way, I am able to understand the unique views and interests of each younger learner and value them for what they are. Through working in a tiny school, I am reminded daily of the journey which the children follow before they reach me in Year 5. I am aware of the very great deal that they already know from home and school before I take my turn in shaping them. At this stage in their education, I do not know the futures for which I am preparing them. It is essential that their resilience and intellectual

curiosity are nurtured, and that they attribute positive feelings towards any further education.

Whatever I teach, I think about how to make it relevant to children and their lives. It is not my job to cram children with superficial learning. I put what matters to children, in order for them to grow intellectually, emotionally and creatively, at the heart of everything we do as a class. I have always felt that it is important to travel the 'academic journey' of a year with a class; I am in the privileged position of leading but I am learning and growing alongside the children at all times. I consider their ideas and interests as essential in shaping where the learning will go next. Learning is a serious pursuit, though it can be achieved in a playful manner.

Jenifer: What I notice is your knowledge of each individual. Sometimes, a major part of your overall planning may be based on a child's interests, but more often your knowledge of a child – their family, their experiences and interests, their particular struggles and strengths – is reflected in your interactions with each one. It is seen in the way you guide them, the language you choose when you speak to them, or how you frame the way they might approach a particular task. It suggests a particular kind of noticing and an application of your accumulated knowledge of each child. Emily and Zoe, you take particular care in matching books to readers, and you share books between you. You identified two children for whom reading is 'their thing', as you put it, but they need more 'book experience', so you asked me to read with them each week. It's a special time for us. And Gemma, you are alert to what children are revealing to you, so that you are, for example, able to catch a writer as he plays with trucks and tractors, rather than asking him to sit at a table to write something less interesting.

Paul: Pupils can learn to cherish knowledge, experiences and the works that they create. I would rather a child produced 12 exquisite pieces of work in a particular subject over the year than a book full of worksheets that are not valued by either student or teacher.

The teachers do feel able to take their time and allow space for the children to properly commit to the work they do. Emily was so shocked when she saw Year 6 children putting their exercise books in the bin at the end of the year that she takes great care to provide a way of publishing their work. The idea of handmade books has spread through the school from the Year 5/6 classroom, where children are skilled at making bound books. Whether a cunningly folded pamphlet that provides the structure for Key Stage 1 children to recount the life cycle of a butterfly or a signature hand-bound Victorian diary, these have the potential to be 'exquisite', and each child makes the book their own. Here is an example of how pedagogies are shared and grown. No idea ever stands still as the teachers take ideas and reshape them with different children in mind.

Zoe: I remember a piece of work I created in geography when I was in Year 7. We were asked to research a city in America and create an information text. I chose New York. Our teacher allowed us to present this as we wished. I created a booklet in the shape of a 'big apple', with vivid designs throughout. Many of my peers also seemed very engaged with the project and worked to their strengths – one using their ICT (information and communications technology) skills to create a PowerPoint; another including mathematical graphs and statistics to present population data of their city.

Whilst I lacked confidence in writing, I did not with regards to my creative ability. I found that by being allowed to work to my strengths and create something I was visually pleased by, my motivation and confidence towards the content of the final product was increased, resulting in a high-quality piece of writing too. My teacher recognised its quality and sent me a 'good work' postcard home and displayed my work on the classroom wall.

I felt that my work was truly valued at this time, and that's a feeling I strive to give to my pupils. I want children to know that there is a point to their learning and that their work is appreciated. I ensure that children in my class are working towards a final product, whether this is an 'Elephant and Piggie' book, published during our annual book festival, a cress head teaching the process of living things sold at our farmers' market, or an afternoon tea menu used for the residents of the local care home.

A feature of Zoe's classroom is the making of reading-record books. These began as a personal project – a chance for her both to record her reading of children's novels and to have the satisfaction of producing an attractive and intriguing little book. The children soon wanted to make similar books – and not only to read the titles that Zoe was reading, but also to share their own recommendations. The teacher's own preoccupations as a reader and artist were there to be shared.

Emily: I believe in setting high expectations for children, not in terms of knowing the exact outcome of what they will produce, but in allowing their learning to have no limit. In order for children to produce high-quality work and thinking, they must be prompted by high-quality starting points. They must have the freedom to play an active role in their learning, not merely ticking boxes on the curriculum. It is essential to us all that the children experience more than just one-dimensional learning. They know that there is always an expectation that they bring themselves to a piece of work or project. There is nothing more frustrating than reading work which has been so tightly structured that there is barely a difference between one child's outcome and another's.

That is one reason why I value 'writing workshops' in my class. We play with language and write freely or with enabling restraints – perhaps a word or extract as a seed of inspiration. Children use language to suit themselves. Feedback concerning spelling, punctuation and grammar is personalised and

dependent on when the child is ready to receive it. Children know that their contributions are always valid, even if there are revisions to be made.

The teachers believe that the children should see purpose in all that they do. This is particularly important to Zoe.

Zoe: As a pupil, I learned best and was always more motivated by a learning environment when I could see significance in the content and that it was interesting and worth knowing. Too often I wondered what was the point. As a teacher, my most memorable and successful experiences have been when I've put this into practice myself.

I think of a term's learning about the Second World War. Children each took on the role of an East End child who would be evacuated to Suffolk. They regularly worked and wrote in role, keeping a beautifully illustrated diary which recorded facts, experiences and feelings. Their visit to a re-enactment created by the Poppy Line was enriched by their deep understanding of the period. At one point, they wrote letters, in role, to their real parents, who received the letter through the post and wrote back, also in role.

If the teachers have high expectations of those they teach, they also recognise the importance of strong and trusting relationships, not only between child and teacher, but also between peers – both adult and child.

Emily: The trusting relationships I develop with my pupils and colleagues are rooted in mutual respect. During a recent immersion week, my class were transformed into Victorian schoolchildren, and I into the schoolmistress. I was reminded of that mutual trust and respect as they instantly fell into role and allowed me to completely transform their school lives for that week. Because of their trust in me, I was able to use the dunce's hat and make those who are left-handed write with their right, allowing an authentic but ethical experience. The children were able to immerse themselves in the experience as they knew that I would safely meet them halfway. One mother reported that she was intrigued to see the serious scrubbing of hands in readiness for inspection in the mornings and, when we reproduced a nineteenth-century photograph of a class outside the school, I couldn't understand why the teaching assistant was showing it to me, until I realised that it was not the original photograph but the black-and-white image of me and my own class in their waistcoats and pinafores.

Jenifer: After this week, Emily asked her class to look back and reflect on the experience using a frame for reflection developed by Harvard's Project Zero team (Krechevsky et al 2013). We used 'I remember' as one prompt. My list included:

- a (left-handed) child telling me about the rule against using the left hand and how he was able to think about the cruelty of that and what a difference that would have made to his own life;

- the speed with which children lined up in height order, boys and girls separately;
- the finger cuff for fiddlers at Gressenhall Workhouse;
- the blotted copybook;
- the child's pleasure in a new pencil grip and beautifully written 'A's.

I had not seen a finger cuff before – it is much like a handcuff, with rings that clamp round each finger – and I was very struck by its cruelty. However, the children didn't seem to especially notice it, whereas, having experienced the insistence on right-handedness and the use of the dunce's cap during their immersive week at school, they noticed and discussed these with authority during the visit to the workhouse.

The trust that Emily talks about is two-way. The child trusts the adult – knows they will be safe and that what they do will be interesting and valued. The adult trusts the child to believe – to engage seriously with what is offered. Furthermore, and crucially, adults themselves are trusted in ways that make them feel safe enough to take risks that are so intellectually and affectively engaging.

The trust bestowed by a head teacher is essential in creating an environment where teachers – and children – are able to be adventurous, take creative risks, trust their own judgement, and thus grow as teachers and learners.

Paul: Just as I reflect on my experiences as a learner to inform my practice as a teacher, I often think about my time as a classroom teacher when making decisions as a head. I commonly have conversations with myself, asking the question: 'Is this something that the 25-year-old me would want to do in their classroom?' As a young teacher, I knew I wanted my school to have high expectations of my work, but I also felt that, as a professional graduate, I should be trusted to manage the learning in my classroom.

Gemma reflects that, initially, this expectation felt extraordinarily scary. But as she found herself able to take the initiative, she recognised its value.

Gemma: We start the week off with a rough plan for where our learning is going. Targets are drawn up for the children, enhanced provision set out in the room, including objects to spark interest; lessons begin with a whole-class session based on a particular area of the curriculum. By playtime, several children have usually gone off into their own space when 'getting busy'. Adults in the room are encouraged to work alongside children and take opportunities to extend learning.

One example which always sticks in my head was when a Reception child found a tiny spider. She named it Pedro! The spider was brought inside and introduced to the class. There was excitement in the room and things really took off. By the end of the day, the children had created a habitat for Pedro to

live in, made wanted posters looking for his family, written letters to the village council about planting more trees to help wildlife, researched how many legs spiders have and their different body parts, developed counting skills, read a story about spiders, created some designs for another home for minibeasts and, before we knew it, the day had slipped by and it was home time.

During this one day, we had hit so many points from both the Early Years Foundation Stage and National Curriculum; all children (and, in fact, staff) were highly enthused and excited to come back the next day to continue their work. There was a buzz of excitement as the children went to tell their parents about what they had been learning. At the beginning of the day, I had no idea that this was the direction that the learning would go. It takes quite a lot of confidence from staff and the head teacher to be able to give up this control, but when this happens successfully, the engagement and depth of understanding are worthwhile.

Jenifer: This is why we need this strong community of learners. To set out at the beginning of the day without knowing quite what its outcomes will be is daunting. Often, we keep ourselves safe by hanging on to control. But that is magical thinking. The idea that if you tell a child something they will know it is a self-deceptive thought. However, although you talk about giving up control, neither you nor the adults with you give up responsibility. That is why talk is so important. Talking through what is happening helps us to see more clearly how, and what, children are learning; it helps us to establish a strong sense of our pedagogies.

Emily: You cannot make somebody learn something. It is impossible to ensure every child learns exactly what you would like them to learn within a given lesson time. One must create an environment which stimulates learners to want to learn and to be receptive to learning. What I find most interesting and energising about the school is how we are a community of learners. We have more experienced learners among us (teachers, teaching assistants, other enabling adults) and less experienced learners (children aged 4 to 11). Yet we are all part of something together; we all assist in each other's learning. I am always reminded of this community when we embark on our Christmas or summer shows. For the past three years, we have involved the whole school in creating their own performances. Last summer, the children hosted their very own circus. Now, they are making a film based on a famous picture book for children. Children are not handed a script which has been crafted by adults, for adults. They work together to imagine what they could do and then they exceed even their own imaginations. As teachers, we have to be in the moment during projects such as these because children's lives and ideas are not stagnant. We can help them to invest themselves in being a part of something – a community of learners – and we too must be an equal part of that community. It is important that they know that teachers do not have all the answers. I certainly do not.

Gemma: My belief is that in order for children to learn, they need to be interested. Learning needs to be made relevant to them; this is different for children of different ages, and our job as teachers is to inspire, motivate and capture children's interests. How we do this very much depends on the individual class and the children within it.

Zoe: The memory of my New York project confirms my commitment to understanding every child as a person and unique learner. All deserve the right to an education that works best for them. I wish for all children to be able to access the learning and feel confident in their own abilities, and so my teaching must remain flexible in order to achieve that.

Paul: How can teachers flourish if you both prescribe exactly what you want them to do and dictate the standards you expect? I believe that this limits creativity, job satisfaction and professional curiosity. I see this as 'squeezing the toothpaste tube at both ends'. However, this is not without challenge, as the variability in the quality of teaching at both a local and national level is a constant concern to school leaders and is a threat to creative approaches. If you have capable teachers, it becomes easy to trust their autonomy. However, where teachers are less intellectually engaged, then it becomes tricky for both teacher and management. It is a particular challenge for a head teacher to find ways of strengthening and supporting staff so that children have the best possible experiences. It is because of this variability that successive governments introduced into schools prescriptive pedagogies such as the National Literacy Strategy and the current approach to teaching synthetic phonics. Whilst this may be understandable, I worry about policies that target weaker teaching by changing the practice of all, and feel that this 'lowest common denominator' approach does not work with a highly skilled team. I certainly loathed the National Strategies as a teacher myself when they were introduced.

Emily: I do know one thing, however: learning is slow. There are no quick fixes, whatever commercialised schemes tell us. Think about one strand of a teacher's job – developing young readers. Good reading results do not come from excessive practice in exam technique; they stem from an embedded culture and expectation of reading as a natural and meaningful intellectual task for both pleasure and purpose – sometimes personal and sometimes shared as part of a wider community of readers.

I explain to the adults who help with guided reading that the children are like our apprentices. We model our behaviour as readers, drawing from our greater experience, but never underestimate what they will bring to the table. It is my job to guide and nudge children to understand themselves as learners and why education is the most powerful tool available to them. It is crucial that they understand that learning and education is powerful, not that teachers are mysteriously powerful.

Jenifer: It seems to me that the whole school culture supports the teaching of reading. I think of the way that you are building such a beautiful library and the way that children encounter and own reading in different ways: the child who possessed and was possessed by one picture book for over a year; how the 'Piggie and Elephant' (Mo Willems [2010] *We Are in a Book* and other titles) books took the whole school by storm; how this reader brings his experience of farming to help us understand *Crowstarver* (King-Smith, 1998); that one tells us the delicacy of her father's soldering as we read *Clockwork* (Pullman, 1996); and these children are sobered and determined to learn more as they read Morris Gleitzman's novel, *Once* (2005). More than that, every trip and visit – to the care home on the bus, to the County Records Office, the seashore or a Stone Age camp – every book read aloud, every conversation undertaken contributes to children's lives as readers.

Paul: I aim for the schools I lead to be dynamic places of learning for both children and the adults who work there. I like my teachers to have the confidence to be able to try out new approaches, have the space to research and reflect on them, and a platform to discuss and share their experiences with colleagues.

We are all still learning. Teachers need to have the confidence to visit each other's classrooms to model new approaches and learn new skills. I believe that heads have a significant influence on teacher confidence in their school through how they make judgements for appraisal purposes. High-stakes approaches that focus on one or two narrow measures will naturally lead to teachers becoming risk-averse. A broader approach, where the odd slip-up does not lead to catastrophe, and a culture where staff do not feel only as good as their last lesson is one that I feel is more conducive to teacher development.

There is no doubt about the fluidity of personal pedagogies in this community of learners. Teachers' willingness to reflect, to take on new ideas or points of view, and to revisit firmly held beliefs is one of its strengths.

Zoe: In order to be the best teacher I can possibly be, my pedagogical theories will constantly be developing and restructuring as I challenge myself to explore new and innovative teaching ideas for each individual.

Sometimes, teaching evolves as a result of necessary change. It is not immediately easy.

Gemma: When I first thought about my move from Key Stage 2 into what is now my beloved 'Rabbit class', the idea of teaching a combination of Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 children filled me with fear. I have always been a keen early years teacher at heart and have a love of 'free flow', 'planning in the moment' and 'learning through experience'. However, I didn't see that this was possible with Key Stage 1 children in the class as well. The move allowed my

teaching to change significantly over the years as I have gained experience, seen what works well and captured so many special moments from the children. I have realised that it doesn't matter which year groups you teach, as long as the learning is meaningful and appropriate to the individual children, and that they are making progress. I try not to think too often about the different year groups, but to think more about them as individuals and how they are making progress. Obviously, we do need to remember that, in the educational climate that we live and work in, I must ensure that the majority of Year 2 children will be at the expected standard for SATs (Standard Assessments Tests) at the end of Year 2; that the Year 1 children are on track to pass their phonics screening check; and that Reception children will make enough progress to get good levels of development by the end of the year. But if they can do this and still have a love of learning and show interest in different areas, then I consider it a successful year in school. Of course, there are tensions here, but my aim is that children should love learning and not be overwhelmed by these external demands.

The teachers at the school work hard to ensure that the children are fully and deeply engaged in what they learn at school. But there is a personal cost. Planning and pursuing a vibrant curriculum alone, however enjoyable, places serious demands on the teachers' time and energies. Alongside that, these teachers choose to absorb the pressures of data-gathering, testing and the management of teacher assessment in ways which ensure that such pressures are not passed onto the children but which certainly place an extra burden on the teachers. They might say that it gets in the way. They want, above all, as Gemma says, to see children going home smiling and recounting things that they have learned and enjoyed. And they are committed to their own professional growth in the service of children's learning.

Emily: My pedagogy is fluid and, if it ever migrates from this position, then I know that it is time to step back and reflect. It is a joy to discuss with colleagues the learning which goes on in our classrooms; we draw each other into our constant cycles of reflection and work together to find different paths, iron out creases and spark new ideas.

The staff at this school are lifelong learners. They bring that orientation and experience to the table. They appreciate the importance of trust. They value relationships and recognise that knowing each individual is crucial. In thinking about pedagogy and the ways in which they are going as teachers, they celebrate the power of this community of learners.

Relationships, trust and a knowledge of each individual child are fundamental to a teacher's developing pedagogies. The trust of the head teacher sets free the individual teachers' thinking and sets expectations high. Herein lies the value of these teachers' mutual trust and professional companionship. These teachers talk through and think through the daily challenges of the classroom, its curriculum, its children and its strategies. They are mutual sounding boards and fellow inquirers. They provide for each other safe intellectual and emotional spaces which inform the relationships they establish with children. If children are to grow and learn, they say, they must trust their teachers, who will, in turn, trust them.

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