**Headteacher interview**

Interviewer:

Okay, so it's nice having the Ofsted report up there on wall, because kind of what we are here to talk about. Have you got the questions that I sent through or do you want one of those yourself? There we go. There we go. So the reason I wanted to chat with you was to really reflect on the work we've done over the last, what is it, four years? 2019, isn't it? [inaudible 00:00:38], yeah.

And the role of that as part of the Ofsted outcome in terms of the outstanding. So let's just start with the first question. And the first question was, it's just about that journey really, that what do you attribute the growth from. If it's possible to summarize it, what do you attribute the growth from requires to improvement to outstanding? To rest on, if you're able to summarize.

Headteacher:

Well, I think I can picture with absolute clarity the first time that you came to this school. And I described to you the passivity of the children, which was contrasted with the intellect and the maturity which they displayed when you got them into individual conversations. And the fact that five years later, we have children who are..

I would say that the biggest thing that's made the difference in that journey is giving the children their voice. And I do think that that's the difference between a good school and an outstanding school. And a good school is where you are doing all of the right things, and it's the extent to which it is or is not yet being taken up and acted upon by the customer.

I think that what's shone through as being so strong and powerful in the last Ofsted inspection was the strength and voice that the children have, their confidence to use their voices. The absolute belief that their voice will be listened to, and the confidence with which they communicate their messages. And that included in this instance, to a set of Ofsted inspectors.

Interviewer:

So lots of things must have happened in order to allow the children that sense of agency and confidence with their voice. What do you think drew that shift?

Headteacher:

I know what drove it, because I think it was really carefully planned and orchestrated, and I think that very little of it was organic and coincidental. And I think the biggest factor in it was being really courageous in our leadership to stick with the amount of time that we knew it was going to take for it to work and to avoid...

And it was really hard because it would've been a lot more comfortable at times to have interim inspections and monitoring visits that were more positive, because we might've been in a position where some smoke and mirrors had done us some favors. And it had looked like we'd accelerated things more quickly.

But we don't work like that because we don't work for those people, we work for our children. And being absolutely determined to stick with that and knowing the extent to which true authentic change takes time.

(pause while Headteacher attends to child at her door)

Interviewer:

Where were we? So we were talking about this sense of stuff happening over time, as it were, and I wondered what you thought were the features of teaching, learning, whole school vision, that had changed most significantly since 2019 to drive that. The change that you described.

Headteacher:

I think the vision was about building a team of people who were child-focused, which took time and that was probably one of the hardest things that we needed to do. But it was absolutely vital because if you are putting children's voices at the center of everything that you are doing, and yet you are running a school with people who don't truly believe that what a child has to say is worth listening to, then you are creating a clash and those things will collide and there's no authenticity to it. So I think that that was probably one of the biggest and doing work where people could feel our vision, but we hadn't actually articulated it. And then ending up in a position where we had this really clear articulation, which is actually captured at the very beginning of the Ofsted report. And I felt very comfortable that that was the first thing that was described in that report.

So I think that that was absolutely instrumental. And then in terms of the features of teaching and learning, so if you've got that, "Why are we doing this?" Then you've got to look at the how. So if you're saying the child is at the center of everything and we want to hear what they've got to say, then you've got to give them a mechanism through which to do that in a constructive, positive, realistic way. And I think that that was what we gained from what we initially called the rubric and what we came to call the enduring principles of learning. And I think that in itself manifested our understanding and engagement with it. At first, it was a set of statements and a set of scores, and by the end it was an entire philosophy and an approach, and it was way bigger than those scores and those grids that we'd started with.

Interviewer:

That's interesting, that reflection on how it works. But that took time, didn't it?

Headteacher:

Yeah, a long time.

Interviewer:

Even allowing the interruption of the pandemic. That took, yeah. a took a while.

Headteacher:

It absolutely did. Because I think part of it was about those relationships with staff. There were those that took to it like ducks to water and for whom it was second nature who were a minority. There were those who liked the idea but had no ability to realize or translate that into a reality in their classroom. And I remember us being sort of stuck on a washing machine cycle with them where we were saying, "Talk less, get them to talk more. Talk less, get them to talk more." And they couldn't even articulate how. And so that took us then engaging with some very operational tools, the Voice 21 strategies, which I felt complimented the bigger, deeper work of the EPOL. I think that whole idea of being really strong and true about the idea that if you really want to see the change manifested in outcomes, traditional outcomes in the reading, in the writing, you have got to affect it in the speaking and the listening first of all.

Interviewer:

And that took, from my perspective, real courage. I think not every ... In fact, not many schools are happy doing that. You had local school improvement officer looking at you, you knew you had Ofsted coming again at any minute, but you managed to hang on to the understanding belief, vision of the fact that the talk mattered more and you had to do more of that in order to generate long-term gains. I mean, how did you stay true to that? It must have been remarkably hard looking back on it.

Headteacher:

There were days when I thought, "This is reckless." There were, but because our organization is not set up to serve a local authority officer or an Ofsted inspector, as much as we respect and value they're critical friend input, some more friendly than others. The reality for us is that because we had built a foundation on which we absolutely believe our children are our customers, how else could you decide what you ... You couldn't change it because then you would no longer be serving your customer base.

Interviewer:

So it's all about the fitness of the purpose for the children as the driving-

Headteacher:

And the absolute belief by everybody, or certainly at various stages by enough people that these were the people who were at the center of our organization. This is why we are here. These are the people that we need to make a difference to because if we make a difference to them, then we can evidence and influence those other people. We can evidence development and improvement. But if we can't do that for our children ... And there were times within the program where ... And our results still are an area that we will always want to improve, but we had the local secondary school saying, "No, you don't send us the best results out of the cluster of schools, but you send us children who know what they know, who are authentic in the grades that they come to us with and have amazing behavior and attitudes to learning. So they're ready to carry on their learning journey."

And it is sometimes holding onto things like that that does give you the strength to continue. The biggest thing that gives you the strength to continue is hearing what the children have to say when the children tell you about the difference that things make. When children tell you about what matters to them. And sometimes really difficult things, really challenging things. They've just used their voices to campaign for us to do something about the situation in the Middle East.

Interviewer:

Right. Yes, you were talking a bit about that a long ago? When was that conversation when the children had come in ... Yes. It must have been [inaudible 00:07:39] term. I sent it to you with the ... We were talking about that really hard. Yeah. So one of the things I've been trying to unpick, and I'm not sure I've got there yet, is the extent to which, how did these changes come about in terms of what you did with staff, what we did with staff in terms of professional development? How did they come about because of staff's positive orientations about diversity [inaudible 00:08:08] kind of already there, or? So what you talk about, not just the children, but the work went into the staff is how I'm seeing it. So I'm trying to work out where that transfer happens, if you can even articulate that.

Headteacher:

So we have to be the agents of change. So if we want things to change for our children, the only way we can change them is by changing what we are doing. So it was about agreeing what we wanted to achieve. And then the most intelligent place to start when you want to affect change like that is to create your own tipping point. So you therefore start with the people that are closest to the pivot as it were. And that was exactly how we started because then that celebration of success and identification of success bred more interest and curiosity and desire in others.

Interviewer:

And I guess that curiosity is really important part, isn't it? That's the sense of being curious enough to want to make changes with the children, being curious enough to want to know about them and to ensure that they have curriculum experiences that are about their lives. So I guess another change you undertook was making sure you had a curriculum that reflected the children in the classroom as it where?

Headteacher:

Absolutely. So it was almost like creating a bridge between what these children must experience and engage with because that's our national curriculum and I believe in that right to a standard basic amount of knowledge and skills. And then looking at where our starting points were and understanding in that sense, not worrying about where our starting points were, but accepting where our starting points are and embracing them and really celebrating that ... It is that thing, isn't it, of how you look at the situation. So you can look at the situation and say, "Oh, I've got 29 out of 30 children in my class who are EAL, who don't speak English." Or you can look at it in the way ... So we wanted to look at it positively. So we found people like you who enabled us to look at it positively. What are the benefits of having 29 children in your class who are, and then we use the words bi and multilingual. And not instantly talking about something in a pejorative way, but celebrating the benefits and the strengths that come with those things.

So we looked at what we already love and value about our children and made that very, very explicit. So the fact that their families value education, their families understand that education can be a way of accessing social mobility, and the fact that they are brought up to understand respect. And we celebrated those strengths and embraced what had traditionally been seen as challenges with working with children like that. We kind of turned it on its head, I think. And we asked ourselves, "These children bring so much, they bring so much more than the fact that they don't speak English with a great level of proficiency. That's just a tiny part of their picture. So let's overcome that and look at how we can give them a voice."

Interviewer:

So seeing multilingualism as an asset was a big shift?

Headteacher:

And I've probably got a huge bias there as a linguist. As a linguist I think that the world has become a richer, smaller, more interesting, brighter place by virtue of the fact that I can speak different languages. And I speak a very global, I speak French, and that's a very acceptable language to have as a second language. And I also speak Croatian, which is spoken by four and a half million people, six and a half million worldwide. And I could see the two ends of the spectrum. And I saw the way that people valued French and they didn't value Croatian. And actually I've benefited from knowing both of those languages. And I wanted to dispel this snobbery that sits around languages just because the languages that our children speak are not French, German, or Chinese, Mandarin. I wanted them to understand themselves the benefits that come with bi and multilingualism. I wasn't there to try and convert anybody else, but I wanted those children to be proud of what they can do and see that as an asset and utilize those skills in their own learning.

Interviewer:

So this interests me, I guess moving to the Ofsted outstanding. I'm going to check as well. No, we're fine. If you think about Ofsted and the way it works, the Ofsted framework has no mention of multilingualism and it doesn't mention EAL. They didn't come and look at your school as a multilingual school.

Headteacher:

No.

Interviewer:

So I wonder, what was it, do you think, they saw in your school that led to the award outstanding if their lens wasn't a multilingualism one as it were?

Headteacher:

Because authentically our children can communicate really articulately and we have built a really effective bridge which connects their experiences and what they value, and their heritage, with what it means to live in modern Britain. And that really matters to us that we are this bridge between these two things, and we've made sure that we've communicated that really clearly to our families as well. So the kinds of work that we've done on articulating, for example, protected characteristics, people have said it's unheard of the way that we've taken those protected characteristics and translated them into a language which every stakeholder in our community has found acceptable.

Interviewer:

Can you give me an example of what you mean by that?

Headteacher:

So the Equality Act has nine protected characteristics, and some of those characteristics are ferociously defended by our school community, and some of them are really challenging for our community to accept. So an example would be on the one hand, embracing the right to practice religious faith. And another example where the challenge exists would be in relation to some aspects of sexual identity. But we live in modern Britain and all of those characteristics must be protected. So we again looked at things through the lens of our children and actually some of the language which is used within the Equality Act quite rightly, it's a legal act, piece of law, is really complicated and quite abstract. So we worked really hard with stakeholders to translate it into a language that by making it age appropriate there was no reason why anybody needed to fear it, or object to it, or find it difficult. So that's what we did. And that's, if you like, at the heart of everything we do and then all of the other aspects of learning how to communicate and have a voice are sort of built upon those foundations.

Interviewer:

And there are other lovely terms in here. I'm just looking at the report [inaudible 00:17:37]. "Pupils experience a sense of joy and achievement. Their behavior is exemplar. Permission for their personal development is exceptional." And they're all extraordinary recognition, aren't they? For what you've done. Do you feel that the report captures what the school is?

Headteacher:

It was really funny. I found the report really difficult because speaking very candidly and frankly to you, sat on the RRI, the regulations are that we could not afford to have a third RI judgment because a third RI judgment would come with a forced academy order. Likelihood is I would lose my job and the school would become part of some multi-academy trust. So the stakes were so high that our focus was on securing good, evidencing good. We needed to be good. We have no delusions about the state of our attainment grades compared to national or even local. But we also are acutely aware that if you as an English speaker, if you are born in this country and you start to attend school aged four, you have seven years to reach the expected attainment grades for end of key stage two. If you arrive from overseas and you can't speak English, you have two years regardless of what kind of educational experience you've had.

And even if we look at our nearest neighbors, if we look at the children that have come from Europe, most European countries don't start formal education until they're seven or eight years old. They understand the importance of constructive and experiential play. And their kindergarten phase is much, much longer and more substantial and better planned than anything that we ... I was trying not to get political. Than we experienced in this country. So one of the really important things that we needed to do was to make sure that we communicated without excuse, but with reason, our context. And we do that proudly. And that's what we did with the Ofsted inspectors. There was a moment when two senior HMIs reflected on that piece of data that I've just given you when I said about the seven years versus the two years. And they sat there and they literally looked skyward and you could see the cogs wearing and they understood and accepted that.

Interviewer:

That's interesting. So that's not in their brief to take account of it?

Headteacher:

It is in their brief to take account the school's context.

Interviewer:

Right. Very broadly, yeah.

Headteacher:

So it was our responsibility to paint without making excuses. These children don't need excuses, they don't need pity, they just need some empathy. And Brené Brown has always done the most gorgeous exemplification of sympathy versus empathy. And that's what we use that all the time, and that was what we needed to communicate. We are not making any excuses, and the report refers to the fact that the results are low, are poor. But if you look at where children are coming from, if you look at the fact that within any six-week period, we could have start-agains for significant numbers of children within any one term, within any one academic year. But we know that those are our customers. We don't want a different customer base. We live in a part of town which welcomes children into this country first of all. What we used to find was that we were like a transit area. So people would come through and as soon as they could, they would be off somewhere better. Now they stay. And even if their housing may move, they want their children and their children want to stay.

Interviewer:

So I guess that's what the reported has captured, isn't it? So coming back from circle in a way to the fact that you've invested so much in this [inaudible 00:22:36] curriculum and you know that it doesn't necessarily show any results immediately, do you feel that the payoffs in the longer term are still going to be better even if they're not measurable while they're with you? In terms of reading and writing I guess I'm talking about.

Headteacher:

I know they're better.

Interviewer:

[inaudible 00:22:57].

Headteacher:

I know that they're better and I know that they're better through so many more robust measures than a SAT test. I know that they are. And the research says that. The research says that something that you may be able to produce in a test doesn't mean it's transferred to your long-term memory and it's there for you to draw upon. What these children have, they keep, and I know that. And that's evident through their work. It was evident through the conversations that they constantly have. Don't forget in that period before Ofsted or even after Ofsted, we were on half-termly local authority inspections, which were as robust as a mini Ofsted every single time. And we were able to open the school for people to come and pick who they wanted to speak to and for children to be able to articulate what they know, what they understand, what they remember, what they can do.

And I think actually to the state where the children were then weaving elements of that together to build something bigger than what we had built, which is exactly where I think outstanding goes. It's when it's evident in the children. It's not just the grown-ups talking about it. There was this moment during the Ofsted inspection and the inspectors wanted to do a deep dive into art and they wouldn't let any of us in the room. So they'd spoken to the art leader and then they'd got a group of children together and they were just down the corridor meeting with these children. And I'm there and the art leader's there, and we are pacing up and down outside the room. All of a sudden out comes one of our year six girls. And I think, "Oh my goodness, what's going on?" And I say, "What's happening?" And she said, "I'm just going to get my sketchbook."

Honestly, these inspectors, they just don't get mark making and manipulation. So there she was about to teach this guy what mark making and manipulation was all about through illustrating it with her own work. They go back in so we are again pacing around. They all then come out of the room and I think, "Oh my life, they shouldn't have come out so soon. They should still be in there. There should be much more for them to talk about."

And one of our year six boys is at the front and he says, "To truly understand art in our school, you will need to come with us. We can't possibly stay in a room and show you everything there is to know." And he took the inspector on talk with the other kids and walked them around the school. And that is authentic. That's come from the children because of the way in which their voices have been grown and shaped, not allowed to run free. Because that's part of how you empower. You teach them how to. It's all the little bits that come together, like teaching them ... We have this thing here called the ometer, which is passive, assertive, aggressive. And we constantly try to model to the children, what does it look like if you make a passive response, what would an aggressive response? So what could assertive responses look like? And that was one of the ways that we overcame this passivity amongst them. But yeah I will never forget things like that.

Interviewer:

That's extraordinary. That is [inaudible 00:26:53].

Headteacher:

So I look at the front page of this report and it means nothing to me and it leaves me pretty cold really, if I'm honest. And that felt really uncomfortable because we still see all the things that we want to do and improve. When I read the report, I recognize my school. I think that's the bit that's different. I did really struggle with it. And one of the inspectors said to me, "An outstanding school doesn't mean perfect, it means exceptional." And I've really hung onto that because I'm really comfortable with the fact that this school is exceptional because these children are exceptional.

Interviewer:

They are. And they do use that adjective quite a lot in the report, don't they? It's wonderful. I mean, yeah, I love this idea of kids being so confident and so powerful that they can make an Ofsted inspector stand up and come with them. That's wonderful.

Headteacher:

Yeah. We've got a young man who loves responsible roles. If I tell you his name, it wouldn't identify him because his name's (name of child). He loves responsible roles. He looks like he's in the military with the number of badges that he wears. And we got today two on the inspection and you're ready for a fight to drive through. Having had that team meeting at the end of day one, you are ready for that. "Right. Okay, we're going to make sure you see these things." And it was at that stage that we said, "Unleash (name)." But actually it is exactly as I've just described to you. It's about unleashing the power of all of the children within this school, not just one.

Interviewer:

To keep an eye on your time at this time. Just finally, and I haven't put it as a question, so it's bit cheeky to ask it, but we have been discussing it already. So obviously you've got this wonderful inspection report, which rightly reflects everything you've done over the last few years with (School name) Junior School and now you are merged with your partner infant school. What's next, I guess?

Headteacher:

I think it's, we are really daunted by expanding the offer and being really credible in what we do and why and helping people believe and understand the changes that are necessary. And I think the biggest thing that this has given us is a little bit more self-belief that all of these things that we've done differently and there are a lot, building a curriculum from the ground up based upon the principles that we learned would make a real difference to our learners. And sticking with that and waiting to see that come to fruition, I think that that gives us a little bit more self-belief. Not arrogance, but a little bit more determination to see how we can dovetail that into that curriculum for (partner school) and then almost make life harder for ourselves here at (school name) because that will feed down to build a better foundation, which will then grow up to become a foundation that will require then more than it currently has built upon it.

So making work for ourselves in basic terms. But it's worthwhile work because it will mean that more of those children are in a stronger position in relation to what they need to be ready for at secondary school than is currently the case. We will always look to welcome children new to the country, new to the area, always. Because this is our community, this is what we do. But it will also mean that for those children, perhaps those children of the sort of second, third generation where it's still beautifully celebrated that home languages are used at home. It may empower their educational experiences to accelerate in a way which currently hasn't been the case.

Interviewer:

Big journey ahead.

Headteacher:

Yeah, but an exciting journey and a journey that makes sense because there are children, we just get to get them sooner and earlier.

Interviewer:

Great. I think I've asked everything I wanted to. Do you have anything else you wanted to say that you've reflected on or have you had enough?

Headteacher:

Turn it off. There you go. Is that all right?

Interviewer:

That was great. It's always great.