**Interview with two senior leaders November 2023**

Interviewer:

That's the one. That's the back-up. There we go. Okay. So first of all, just for the take, can you just introduce yourself so they've got the voice of the person who's speaking?

Participant 1:

I'm (name)

Participant 2:

(name)

Interviewer:

And I'm (name). Great. I'm slightly worried about the noise from above, so if we can talk up as far as possible, that would be great. And so far as possible to do that naturally. So it's lovely to be with you both today and thank you very much. As you know, I've known you both, I guess since I started. You were both here when I started working with the school. It was like late 2018, early 2019, wasn't it? We were working together then, and the school's Ofsted report had that standard of requires improvement. And then last June you had the fantastic, wonderful, much deserved success of the outstanding grading. So I just wondered what in your views attributed to that growth from the requires improvement to outstanding?

Participant 2:

I think that it was having a really clear vision, although at the time I think our vision has evolved in that we were very much focused on the children, but that vision changed over time because we tried lots of different things and then it needs to be tweaked. But I feel like that was the core of what we were doing. Everything we've done is for the children. So yeah, I think that's something that's been really important.

Participant 1:

I think one of the big keys was getting the right people in the building to understand the direction of travel that we needed to go in as well. And when we had people in the building who understood where we needed to go, we could get that consistency in approach. And at that point we were able to invest time and development so that we could understand our pedagogical approach.

Interviewer:

So it's interesting there because Participant 2 you started by saying it was all for the children, so the children were the center of it, but in a way, Participant 1 you're saying, actually it was also about the teachers.

Participant 1:

They gel together for me. So the children are at the center of everything that we do, but we needed staff on board who understood that the children are at the center of all that we do. Lots of people go into teaching lots of different reasons, but we needed people in this building who are here purely to understand, know our children and understand how to get the best from them as learners.

Participant 2:

And I think that, just flowing off from what Participant 1 was saying, I think the leadership, because it was very clear, the head teacher was very clear with where they wanted to go, and it was a case of this is the journey, like Participant 1 said, you're going to come and get on board and go with us on this journey, or actually perhaps isn't for you and then you are going to decide to go elsewhere. I know that that's something that the head teacher was very focused on in terms of every decision that was made was for the children. So yeah, I think it's that clear leadership and everyone kind of modeling and leading by example really helped as well.

Interviewer:

That brings me on to my second question. You mentioned Participant 2 that you felt in a way the vision did change over time. So what are the ways in which teaching or learning or whole school vision did change during the period?

Participant 2:

I think that it adapted in terms of, so we would try an approach and it was always constantly being refined and seeing that if it was working or not. And I think that's what's developed into our curriculum being so bespoke because it works for our community. So I feel like the vision was the same, but it's what happened around it has changed. If that makes sense. I feel like that's more appropriate. Yeah.

Participant 1:

And when you talk about what happened around the learning, the way I see it is you could almost look at them as superficial changes, like tables of four. That's not going to change the world unless you have other things built around it. But we did organize the tables into tables of four. We did organize our curriculum for our children. And the biggest change for me looking as a leader at our school is changing from the teacher delivering to the teacher facilitating the learning in the classroom. And that doesn't always mean that the teacher is standing at the front of the room. It might mean that the children are leading, the teacher's facilitating that.

Participant 2:

So it was supporting staff to really understand that shift of not being at the front and passing all the information over to the children, but actually posing a question and then the children have an opportunity to discuss and then reach their own conclusions. I think that leads into the professional development that we provided by coaching in oracy so that the staff were aware what oracy was about.

Participant 1:

I've written down that oracy became a golden thread that's woven through everything that we do here, but we've chosen carefully who we've worked with so that we expose our staff to the curriculum development and the pedagogical understanding that we want them to put into use in the classroom. So for example, while we worked with you on the enduring principles of learning, we married that up with the best bits of Voice 21, so that we could give our children all of the ingredients that we think they need in the classroom.

Interviewer:

And talking about it now it's like, well this just happened, but of course, it didn't, did it? It happened over time.

Participant 1:

Yes.

Interviewer:

So what were the challenges of making that work and where were the successes?

Participant 1:

I think in terms of the leadership team, the senior leaders had to understand that you cannot change everything at once and it's a gradual process. And we also had to make sure that all of the learning that we did didn't sit with senior leaders. It had to filter through middle leadership into the teaching, into the teaching support because unless everybody owns it, you're not going to get the change that you want.

Interviewer:

Is that's from your view, Participant 2, because you have been oracy lead for someone then haven't you as well?

Participant 2:

Yeah, I think it was just supporting teachers to see what it looked like in the classroom. So sharing really simple strategies that they could use in their classroom that kind of built up their confidence and then they could see how the children responded and the impact that it was having on their learning. I think that really helped to get the buy-in and people were on board with it.

Interviewer:

But it's hard, isn't it? So there are other schools where that would become much harder. Was there anything in particular you did, do you think, or was it just that it was part of this whole bigger picture and you did specifically got the staff to really get why oracy needed to be a golden thread?

Participant 1:

I think the key is the way that we approached it. So yes, we had access to online training. Yes, we did whole school professional development and inset for all staff, but it's that drip feeding at the point of learning where you're in the classroom with the teacher making suggestions that can have an immediate impact. And when the teachers can see that immediate impact during the lesson, that's when it's at it's most powerful and then they'll want to use it again.

Interviewer:

So that's about coaching and modeling then, coming back to what you were saying earlier, then really hands-on as it were. Not telling but doing.

Participant 1:

Absolutely.

Interviewer:

Do what I do rather than do what I say.

Participant 1:

Yeah, and less various. You can talk about it at the planning stage, but that needs to be backed up with going into the classroom alongside and developing those skills.

Participant 2:

And I think teachers reflected to themselves on what the quality of talk was like in their classroom and there were common things that were coming out in terms of the children speak over each other, they don't face each other, the conversation doesn't go anywhere. So teachers had already kind of identified that. So then it was like, well, okay, well we've got some strategies that we can share with you that will help to improve that. And then once they tried them, they could then see the improvement themselves. So then it was like, well, okay, actually this will work, this does work.

Participant 1:

And on the flip side of that, you could also point out to times where the teacher had tried to regain control because they felt out of control because the conversation wasn't in their hands. So they could see it going down a route that they didn't want it to go down, so they stopped, pulled it back, and then it became the children's voice having to go through the teacher. And if you are in the classroom when that's happening, you can say, "Actually, hold on a minute, let's give it back to them and see the impact." And to be able to talk to them about the impact that's having straight away is really powerful. And the other thing is being able to go into somebody else's classroom for a chaperone visit and have Participant 2 say to you, "Do you see what he did there? Do you see how he's facilitating that? He's not taking the control, he's giving it to the children, but he's still in charge of the learning."

Interviewer:

Almost, so that kind of very careful management of children having agency and yet somehow the teacher also being completely kind of mindful of what's going on at every level.

Participant 1:

Yes. I think initially we had two extremes, didn't we? We had the teacher who wanted to control everything that was said in their classroom and the teacher who said, "Oh right. Oracy, that's all about letting the children talk." And then the lesson would become, it would sort of fly off and get all fuzzy around the edges and then the learning would be lost. So it's about training them to come back to the middle, understand that you can have the best of both worlds and here's how it looks. Let me take you to come and watch somebody and I'll talk you through it.

Interviewer:

So it's quite brave, isn't it, for all teachers, because all teachers and often senior leaders want to see written outcomes. How did you manage that, the fact that it was going to take longer to get to written outcomes? What was the thinking there and whether that was a risk?

Participant 2:

I think we knew that the outcomes from when children have that conversation, that's evidence in itself. So if you go and speak to a child in our school, they'll be able to articulate themselves. So I don't think we were caught up with having lots of evidence in their book because speaking to the children was the evidence. But then it got to a stage where the oracy facilitated their learning, so then their outcomes were better in their books, but we weren't caught up with it in the beginning because that would just be too many things to try and deal with that one time. So it was very much, let's get the talk going, but like Participant 1 said, let's not have the talk, compensate the learning. So it's very much that the learning was enhanced through the talk and not as a substitute for them actually gaining any knowledge.

Participant 1:

And again, that had to be very carefully managed so that there was no misinterpretation. So in a school that's requiring improvement, where writing outcomes are low, we have to be careful. So there is about making sure that that balance was right and that's where you would need leaders in the classroom or leaders at the planning stage going, "Yeah, that's great. Let's have that oracy bit there and let's give that time to it. But here this is where you're going to need a written outcome." And making that clear at the planning stage so nothing got fuzzy, there was no chitchat anywhere.

Interviewer:

And that could have been difficult to share with parents or also with local authority inspectors coming in from (district name) too. Were there any other kind of bodies to justify the approach at any point?

Participant 1:

I think when you are a requires improvement school, there's always lots of screws you need.

Interviewer:

Yeah, that's what I was meaning.

Participant 1:

Our school improvement officers, they did come in here half termly, so they would see the growth and they would challenge and support us on it. So they would see examples where it had worked really well and say, "We can see how that's being embedded." And then they would say, "Here, it didn't work quite so well, what are you going to do about it?" And that's where we would come in and provide that support. So as long as they could see the impact of it, it was fine. But we were constantly checking the impact ourselves as well.

Interviewer:

And the impact was measurable in measurable outcomes in terms of improved results as it were in reading and writing?

Participant 1:

I think it has started to show that it's one of those ones that will take its time to come through. That's five years that I've been here and in that time I've seen the children grow up through the school and leave and the last group to leave, you could see the impact of the things that we put into place. But it is a slow burner. It doesn't happen overnight.

Interviewer:

So that was quite brave really in the way of the school to do that because you had Ofsted breathing down your neck, you had the SIO coming in half termly. How did you hang on to that then? I don't know, was it to do with just the commitment to Voice 21 and Enduring Principles or how did you stay the distance in a way is what I'm saying? Because that was brave.

Participant 1:

I think it comes back to the vision, doesn't it? We know what we want for our children. When Ofsted came in 2019, we knew that we weren't ready because we had made the decision that we weren't going to buy somebody else's curriculum in, that we were going to write our own bespoke curriculum embedding the principles of Enduring Principles of Learning and Voice 21. And we were in the early stages of that, so we couldn't show impact in the way that we wanted to and that RI judgment sat really uncomfortable with us, but we needed to have that judgment and it was the right judgment in order for us to carry on with our journey.

Interviewer:

It still seems brave, so I'm not sure that every school would find that an easy one to take. So coming back to the vision and the keeping people with you, I'm interested in this notion of these positive orientations to diversity, not necessarily the ones that we've got directly on the diagram like this, but a sense in which staff weren't just understanding that they need to tweak their teaching and they needed to do a bit more visual cues and focus on vocabulary and all those things that work for children with English as an additional language. But do you think there was a sense in which there was also a necessary shift towards a more positively oriented staff in terms of the diversity among the children you've got?

Participant 1:

I think the staff that we have know that the most important thing is to understand the children. And that statement that we have about the child being at the center of all that we do, it's not just words. Everybody in this building lives and breathes that and that is what made the difference. It was co-produced, everybody was on board. When you read that, it sounds like what you see when you walk around that school.

Participant 2:

And then I think that's what the Ofsted inspectors found when they came. It wasn't just words on a wall, they could see that actually everything that we did was for children so that they could flourish.

Participant 1:

There was a statement in the Ofsted Report that said, "Takes account of the school's diverse community without shying away from what pupils need to know and understand." And I thought that captured what you were asking us beautifully in terms of we don't shy away, we do understand our children and we give them access to what they deserve at this stage of their schooling.

Interviewer:

How do you think you've done that? We've talked about the intense modeling and coaching that's got staff through being more talk oriented in their practice. How have you gone about making sure that it's felt here in the heart and not just in how I do my planning, but it's about really wanting to advocate and be the champion for those children? It's hard to articulate.

Participant 1:

[inaudible 00:18:22] looking at your thinking face.

Participant 2:

I was thinking more of the way that we've supported the children to find their voice. So the fact that all the responsible roles that we have, that's a huge part of our school. And the fact that children know that if they have an idea about a new role that we can have in our school that they can complete an application form and that they will be listened to. I feel like that's kind of really empowered them so that they know the value of their voice and want to share that. And within those roles, they've learned how to kind of work together, they're very diverse, but there's a sense of community in that what connects us as opposed to what's different. So I feel like there's a real celebration of the common things between everybody.

Interviewer:

So a sense of school belonging?

Participant 2:

Yes.

Participant 1:

Yeah. And like you said, that is what has grown that sense of community for us as a school. And I mentioned earlier, the organizations that we choose to associate ourselves with, we don't do something and move on. If we choose to associate ourselves in an organization or an idea, a pedagogical idea, we stick with it because it makes a difference to our children. So the Rights Respecting School Award, that's really important to our children and it does sit at the center of all of the Pupil Voice work, the work with Voice 21, the work with EPOL. The fact that we've chosen Flash Academy for our early language learners because it's based on the work of the Bell Foundation.

So everything that we do is based in research, what's going to make a difference for our children. And you could describe it as lucky when we arrived in 2018 and found that the curriculum needed a jolly good overhaul because it meant that we could rewrite the curriculum for our children and involve our staff in rewriting it. So that means they've got ownership of it. We can weave in the aspects that we want to weave in, but we wrote it together and that's why you will see it delivered with confidence.

Interviewer:

I think that's so interesting your response. Sorry, it's just making me reflect a lot on the fact that as I brought that question to you, I was sort of saying, what did you do with the staff to make them feel more positively oriented to diversity as if you can force someone to do that. But you came back at me, quite rightly said, it was about giving the children voice and agency so the children grow the community. So in a way it's much more organic and community based than you will have positive orientations and diversity, but you can't tell somebody that, can you?

Participant 1:

It's like trying to teach critical stance. You can't do it. It just pops up in your lesson naturally. If you think about how you are going to involve the children, it comes on its own. But if you try and get it into a lesson, you can't. It's too hard to build it.

Interviewer:

It's fascinating. Right.

Participant 1:

We watch the lesson here. It was a reading lesson and it was pre delivering it, and critical stance came out really, really high. She hadn't planned that in. She hadn't said, "What critical stance am I going to put into this lesson?" But she had thought, what do I need to expose my children to and what are the discussion points going to be? And that's why it was so strong.

Interviewer:

And again, I'm thinking of (name’s) teaching as I watched even years ago, back instead of 2019. She did get that, didn't she? That sense of... But again, it comes back to the talk, doesn't it? So the way in which talk facilitates the community building as well as the learning it seems to me is what's going on.

Participant 1:

And also the professional development of the teachers. They meet once a week and that hour and 15 minutes is so important and we dedicate it to really high quality professional development. And the teachers are grateful for that. And it does have an impact in what they do because we've grown reflective practitioners.

Interviewer:

And that's not easy, is it?

Participant 1:

No.

Participant 2:

And even the sort of expectation that the school has in terms of planning and it being two weeks ahead, that's something that I know is good feedback. Actually, teachers really value because that enables them to really be clear what's happening, share that speed with their team if they're not sure. So then they feel confident going into those lessons. So that preparation, they really appreciate.

Interviewer:

So in a way, you've answered the next question, which was what do you think Ofsted saw in your school? You reflected on that, that there was this sense of it wasn't just in the paperwork, it was embodied in what was going on.

Participant 2:

They came... Sorry.

Participant 1:

No, you go.

Participant 2:

When they came, they spoke to the children and that's where they could see that actually everything that we've said, and it's on paper, but they saw it, they felt it. So it was evident. They were really impressed with how the children could articulate themselves and you can't make that up.

Interviewer:

No.

Participant 1:

No. That's exactly what I've written down. So they found a school that was geared for all of its customers. There's nothing superficial. There's no smoke and mirrors. Everything's there for a reason and the children value that. And you can see it when you speak to them, it's very clear. But the staff also value it and that's why we're able to hold onto and develop so many people.

Interviewer:

Yes, because that took time, didn't it, as well. It's interesting that today, I'm only able to interview a very small number of you who've been on the full journey as it were because there's been so much staff turnover. And in a way that must've been quite hard work because it meant every time you had a new academic year, you've got new staff. Was that a challenge or does it feel like you do now?

Participant 1:

So the two people that you are working with this afternoon, (names of middle leaders) , they joined us as trainee teachers. And we have grown them in the time that you've known us into strong practitioners and now into middle leaders in the school. So they are now our phase leaders and I think that's the strength of what we do. We are able to grow our own and grow our teachers and grow them into people who don't want to leave. They want to stay and they want to take on more responsibility and our ethos is in them and that's why they're here.

Interviewer:

Okay.

You make it sound so easy. When we finish the conversation, I'll show you with something to do with comparing your data with other countries that we won't bother with now, but. So coming back to the Ofsted report, so something that interests me, or horrifies me, I'll be honest, as a researcher and a practitioner, is that Ofsted does not come in specifically delivered English as an additional language, that the term EAL has not been in the Ofsted framework since before 2019. And I'm just really curious to know how Ofsted responded to your school is, what, nearly a hundred percent EAL and how they were inspecting that multilingualism aspect of your school.

Participant 1:

I tackled this question by pulling quotes from the Ofsted report that I thought exposed to that and then commenting on that. I'm going to let you go first.

Participant 2:

Thank you. I think it was something that we were very aware of and had to make clear to the inspectors of who we are and what we do to support these learners so that we were almost on a level paying field with other schools who have one or two children who have English as additional language. So I think it was really important for us to make it clear to inspectors the needs of the children and them understanding, despite that, this is all the things that they can do. So in not seeing as lack a barrier or anything like that. And actually, it's something to celebrate the fact that we can speak so many languages and that we can translate for our parents. And so I think it was just really important that the inspectors understood who we were before they could start to make any judgements about what we do.

Participant 1:

And it's something that we quite often have to do, explain our context, lay out who we are, and then allow people to see that what we've said can be seen everywhere. So they talked about our children having a meaningful ownership of their school. And for me that word meaningful is so important. It's not superficial. We don't just have prefects and school council. They actually run our school, our children do run our school. The fact that teachers know exactly what to teach peoples and when, so we've grown that understanding about the way children learn. And that understanding of the way children learn underpins the way that we shape the learning in the classrooms.

Interviewer:

So in a way, they didn't need to come in and say, I still struggle with it. Do you feel in a way, moving between the penultimate and the final question, that the report does really capture who your school is in terms of its multilingualism?

Participant 2:

Yes. Yeah. I mean, when the report was first shared with us, it was heartwarming to listen to, but then also it was just confirming what we already knew, if that makes sense. But it was satisfying that they came and they saw that because that's what we were just doing every day anyway. So yeah, no, the report, I think is an accurate reflection of what we've done to create a really positive learning environment for the children that they, like you said Participant 1, they do leave the school. It's not our decision of what things happens. And that's really important.

Participant 1:

When the report first came out, that outstanding judgment sat a little bit uncomfortably with us because we have spent so long sitting with RI and that became our level. And to go from RI to good is a small jump and it was like a logical jump. To go from RI to outstanding was-

Interviewer:

In every category.

Participant 1:

... a huge change in every category. And so initially, it sat uncomfortably with us and then I sat in Headteacher's office and I read that report again. And when I finished reading it, I said, "If you pick that up, it's us. It's us all the way through." And it doesn't, in a sense, matter about that label. The report reads like our school." And that's the most important thing I think.

Participant 2:

And I think that it is the words in the report that means the most. I think the judgment, it's kind of just like, okay. But it's business as usual. And actually, it's like, well, how can we continue to provide the best for the children?

Participant 1:

But we can recognize our practices in the words that the report uses and that's really good.

Interviewer:

But if there was somebody else coming to that report who was in a completely different part of the country and just wants to read about an outstanding school, would they be able to tell from your report about the identity of your school, of it being very diverse, do you think?

Participant 1:

I think they could, because it is unique in the way that it's written about. I've read other outstanding reports and they don't sound-

Interviewer:

No.

Participant 1:

And if you can see, I keep coming back to it because really powerful, when I read it again, every word that was used, I was able to say, I can think of an example of that. I can see where that's being pulled from.

Interviewer:

It was doing that.

Participant 1:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

So it's interesting because it bothers me that it's not explicitly acknowledged that this is a school that represents 21st century Britain in a way. But what you're saying is it's okay, just don't sweat it, stop fussing.

Participant 1:

It comes back to this one, "Unwavering in their determination for every child to succeed." So it doesn't matter who walks through our door, we will make sure that we give them the experience that allows them to succeed.

Interviewer:

And it's coming back to that sense of school belonging and community then that you were saying mattered so much. So maybe these values transcend the identities that any of us saw or any of the children in the school, maybe. Yeah, sorry, I'm getting a bit philosophical now.

Participant 1:

Because everybody brings their identity and things change. So the people voice might very strongly feel that we need this club or this responsible role, and then you might have a new cohort of pupils who feel very strongly about this and that will then be woven into the fabric of our school. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Wonderful, wonderful. I'm chiefly going to ask you a question which I hadn't put on the question list, so I hope it's okay to ask it and you can tell me to go away if not. I just wondered about, so we are now at a time of incredible change for your school. Quite an unusual situation for you to be in. You just had outstanding for what was very precious to you, remains very precious to you, obviously. And now you've absorbed a whole other school and a whole other staff. Obviously, it's very early days, but have you got any reflections on how you'd hang on to who you are and make that amalgamation work? It must be quite discombobulating for both staff, I would imagine, in some ways.

Participant 1:

You are going to have different thoughts on this to me, so you go first,

Participant 2:

I think because where I was here at the beginning of the journey and where we've led to, I feel like personally it's very reassuring because I felt the way, the rocks and the bumpiness in the journey in terms of all like, oh, is that the right thing to do?

And so I feel like I am now in a position to be able to help others who may be experienced in the same in terms of, oh, we need to do this first. And actually that's not a priority. And talking through the reasons why we will come to that, but not at the moment. I think, actually, I'm in a really fortunate position, especially in my role as a mentor to support others with this journey. And knowing that it didn't happen overnight, it took five years to make that change. And I think we're really fortunate in that we've got a structure which we know works and we can pull from that.

So there's parts that we can take and we can bring to the infant school and say, well this is a really good model. We know it works. Let's have a go at doing this here. And then there are things that we're going to need to work on that are going to be brand new because it's a different school, it's a different setting. So I think it's kind of merging them together, but I feel like it's a really exciting opportunity. Yeah, and I think everyone's onboard and just taking it a bit by bit in terms of, yeah, we can't change everything and fix everything at once. So that's my sympathy. Yeah.

Participant 1:

They are two different schools at two very different stages of their improvement journey. (name of school) is still on a journey of improvement. We're not done yet. We're not finished. And the danger is that you would want to pick up everything that we've done here at (name of school) and say, right, this is the way we're doing it here. That's not how you grow a team. It's not how you get people on board. And what you will end up with is a very superficial understanding of the things that you want embedded. So like you said, we're taking it slowly.

There are some things that we've put into place immediately, like you said, for example, tables of four. That naturally lends itself in a classroom to an organization that encourages talk. That's where we're stopping there for a minute. And when the time is right, we will rejoin Voice 21 because there were some comments when I started there about how they've done Voice 21, they've done the Enduring Principles in Learning, tick that box, finish, move on. To truly embed the principles and to have an impact on the learning in the classrooms, you have to take people with you and that takes time. And to build that, to build the trust, to build the understanding that we're not going to try and change everything at once. And to make the journey smooth, you have to do things one step at a time.

Interviewer:

Absolutely. I think I'm done with my questions. Have you got anything else that you had in your notes that you were dying to share with me or anything that you haven't had time to say?

Participant 2:

I had a few quotes from the Ofsted report as well, in terms of pupils thrive and pupil's flourish.

Interviewer:

Lovely words, aren't they? Lovely terms. Yeah, yeah. You all right.

Participant 1:

I think I've got it here.

Interviewer:

You've got everything here. Thank you so much. Let's turn this off.