**Easterside Primary Academy**

**Exploring Challenge**

**Enquiry Summer 2018**

The Headteacher was joined by a director of the Enquire Learning Trust and colleagues from other Trust schools for a day of enquiry. The school has been asking itself the question *how can we ensure that the thinking of all children, whatever their starting points is challenged?*  The enquiry team observed learning in classrooms across the school and talks with the headteacher about the things the school has been working on and the difference it was making to learning in classrooms.

The lens for observation invited the enquiry team to explore the idea of challenge through the language that was being used by adults as they supported and challenged the learning of children. Asking how that language shaped the tasks children were engaged with and the ways in which the children approached the challenges presented by those tasks. Based upon this framework:

**Basic**

Children will typically: name, describe, follow instructions or methods, complete tasks, recall information, ask basic questions, use match, report, measure, list, illustrate, label, recognise, tell, arrange, repeat, define, memorise

Teachers will typically be modelling and explaining

**Advancing**

Children will typically: apply skills to solve problems, explain methods, classify, infer, categorise, identify patterns, organise, modify, predict, interpret, summarise, make observations, estimate, compare

Teachers will typically be reminding and guiding

**Deep**

Children will typically: solve non-routine problems, appraise, explain concepts, hypothesise, investigate, cite, evidence, design, create, prove

Teachers will typically be coaching and mentoring

Exploring what had been learned in the courses of the day a number of key ideas emerged around what we saw and heard and felt when challenge was high, and children were responding with focus and commitment. When challenge is high:

**Everyone has Clarity of Purpose......**

What was really apparent in whichever classroom we visited was that everyone in the room had absolute clarity of purpose. Teacher and the other professionals in the classroom had patently rehearsed their expectations and how the lesson was to be played out. And because routines were fabulous a lot of this rehearsal was unspoken. Expectations around role, purpose and how lessons develop has become part of the taken for granted way in which those classrooms operated.

That clarity of purpose was invariably shared by the children. More than shared with, it was shared by them. Drawn into the learning they owned that purpose. This was apparent with the youngest children as well as those elsewhere in the school.

What that clarity of purpose meant was that we saw fantastic levels of engagement and huge degrees of commitment to learning. Scanning classrooms, where ever you looked you saw industrious children absolutely focused upon the task in hand. We talked about how this had evolved and the consistency we saw across the school. One of the key features which emerged from those conversations was the idea of modelling. The modelling of adults about how to approach a challenge but also the physical models; on walls, on tables and often projected on to screens in classrooms. Models that not only gave children clarity but also showed them what they needed to do if they were to meet the challenge presented to them and to do so to the highest level of quality.

**Opportunities being created for deep teaching......**

Clarity of purpose is one of the factors which are apparent in classrooms across the school which make space for teacher and other classroom professionals opportunities to engage in deep teaching with individuals or small groups of children. Familiarity and routine were also a key part of creating those opportunities, as were the props and scaffold which had been created for children to help themselves and one another when learning became challenging.

Exploring what was happening in those episodes of deep teaching we came to describe what we were seeing and hearing as *listening and sowing.* There appeared to be a cycle to this activity.

* *The first phase was one of inviting children to explain where they had got to.*
* *Then there were prompting questions as the teacher teased out with them the decisions they had made and why they had made them.*
* *Then there was the sowing of new possibilities, challenging children to think about where they might go to next or challenging them to think about what it would take to take their learning to another level.*
* *As the adult exited the conversation there was a swift rehearsal of the next steps to be taken and affirmation that they were on the right track.*

There were no ceilings in these classrooms, no sense that tasks needed to be differentiated. Differentiated challenge was being sown in real time because these adults had created time to genuinely listen to children and so assess where the next level of challenge was for each individual child in their class.

**The Importance of Talk.....**

Opportunities to talk seemed to be at the heart of children being able to meet the challenges which teachers presented to them. Sometimes this was simply the informal talk that went on between pairs of children or across tables. We heard children testing things out, rehearsing what they might do next, being absolutely clear in their own heads before they moved forward.

Elsewhere lessons had been designed for talk. Children were invited in pairs or in small groups to engage with tasks which involved discussing the challenge which had been presented to them. There was one particularly striking mathematics lesson where the invitation to children on each table was to look for pattern in the geometric shapes on their sheets. The teacher skillfully drawing out their prior knowledge to help them engage with the task and build a common understanding before moving on to a more complex challenge.

This was one of a number of lessons where the formal use of talk was being used to develop children’s thinking and understanding before a written challenge was presented to them. We saw that approach used again and again. Introduction, invitation to collaboratively problem solve then then moving on to an individual challenge.

**Building for Success.....**

The use of talk before the introduction of the key task is a good example of how teachers are thinking about helping children, whatever their starting points to build for success. Lessons with distinct phases. With lots of exploration built into the early phases. Children exploring ideas together and recording the outcomes of their thinking. Often informally on large sheets of paper. And adults working the room. Sowing in additional challenge, supporting when children needed more clarity and reminding them of what they could already do, what they already had to draw upon. The outcome of this gathering of ideas and building of understanding was that when the time came for children to make their individual response they had so much resource to draw upon there was no chance they were going to fail.

Children whatever their starting points or their prior learning were being given the opportunity to succeed. To succeed in the completing of often challenging tasks which would have been beyond many of them had they met those tasks cold. And because those tasks often had no ceiling to what could be achieved we could see ambitious children’s striving to achieve the very best they could.

**Shining the Light.......**

The idea of *shining the light* first emerged in the Early Years classrooms. We were absolutely struck by the obvious delight of adults when children were successful in their engagement with their learning. The light often shone on quite small things, but they were significant, and the adults were careful to include in their praise a reason why they were so delighted with the children’s responses. This replicated itself across the school. Sometimes In whole class discussions, but often in intimate moments when an adult was working with an individual or a small group. In those conversations we heard adults giving children in the moment, real time, precision feedback. What was good was picked out, descriptive praise was given, and a conversation ensued about where to go to next. Those conversations were often characterised by teachers' insistence that it could be better and children's pride in embracing that challenge.

We also saw this specific descriptive praise in the feedback teachers gave children through their marking. And talking to children, they were really articulate in explaining how they used that feedback to move their learning forward.

**Built upon Systems, Routines and High Expectations......**

In every classrooms, throughout the school high levels of challenge are made possible because of the robust systems and routines which shape the day and the ways in which children go about their learning. Those routines mean that rather than waiting for instructions children can almost anticipate where the lesson is going to go next and adapt to the expectations of that new phase. Those systems also mean children are really good at helping themselves and one another when things get tough. And what that means is that time is used really well. Transitions are sharp and well-rehearsed. Tidying up and reorganising routines are well established. Children know what adults’ expectations are and they are able to self-manage their learning around those expectations.

One of the key things which emerged from the day was the children's pride and the pleasure they take in achieving great things. Adults are ambitious and have high expectations of children but equally they have those high expectations of themselves.

**Reflecting about Next Practice.......**

A significant journey has been travelled in Easterside. The outcomes of systematic consistent approaches to learning are apparent throughout the school. Like any school Easterside is in a place on that journey and there were great things to celebrate in the school. The next section leaves the team with some things to think about in the next phase of their journey. Some things to consider as they continue that journey to excellence.

**Becoming Writers......**

In the best lessons we saw where children were engaged in creating a sustained piece of writing there was a sense that rather than being in a writing lesson they were *becoming writers*. The levels of engagement and their commitment to the processes of draft and re-draft were extraordinary. That outcome begs the question; what are the ingredients which have been sown into the learning sequence that enables that to happen? Can the school identify those things and ensure more of them happen more often?

**Designed for Participation......**

In scanning rooms where the combination of a well-designed lesson and fabulous habits for learning meant every child was deeply engaged we discussed the idea of participation. Rather than engagement there was a sense that every child was genuinely participating in the lesson. When achieving this level of participation most challenging was when children were gathered as a group, either on the carpet or being led through a whole class activity. How can teachers ensure maximum participation in large group activities?

**Becoming a Skilful Learning Partner.......**

On so many occasions we saw children working in pairs or invited to share an idea with a learning partner. The children are kind and caring but sometimes not particularly skilful at helping one another. Not as skilful as they might be at being able to tease things out rather than tell their partner what to do. We wondered what the qualities of a good learning partner might be and what props teacher might give children to enact that role well? How might that progress over time? We also wondered what guidance children might be given to be good listeners as well as good questioners?

**From Problem Solving to Reasoning......**

The frame *fluency - problem solving - reasoning* shaped many of our conversations across the day. Not just in discussing mathematics but across the curriculum. We saw fluency lesson and we saw problem solving lessons, but reasoning was less common. And we asked the question how do you design lessons so that learning moves from problem solving to reasoning?