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The University of Cambridge Primary School: Releasing the imagination of a new democratic education

1 Introduction

Cambridge is a small city on the edge of the Fens in the East of England. It is home to its world-famous University which has established an international reputation for excellence. The past 40 years of its history have seen an astonishing flowering of ideas in Cambridge, many generated in University departments and often in areas of information technology that have given rise to growth and economic prosperity in the city and the surrounding area (Rallison & Gronn, 2016). What has come to be known as the "Cambridge Phenomenon" has in turn become a significant challenge for the University itself. The historic centre of the city is congested with insufficient housing for key workers on whom the University relies. Several areas of the city are earmarked for growth, one such being the site previously occupied by the University farm to the north west of the City centre. This area is now called Eddington. The vision for the new development is set out on its website in Box 1:

BOX 1: The Vision for Eddington, Cambridge, UK

The vision for Eddington is to create a place that is sustainable, long-lasting and ambitious, offering a high quality of life to enhance both the City and University of Cambridge.

The University is one of the world's leading universities, but it must continue to develop and grow, and needs to address the lack of affordable accommodation for its staff and post-graduate students.

Eddington and the wider North West Cambridge Development seeks to secure the University's long-term future and contribute to the City's growth by providing homes for key workers, students and the public in a vibrant place to live.

This development will ultimately include:
- 1,500 homes for University and College staff
- 1,500 private houses for sale

- Accommodation for 2,000 postgraduates
- 100,000 sq/m of academic and research and development space of which up to 40% may be private research with University connection or Research Institutes
- Community facilities including the University of Cambridge Primary School, Storey's Field Centre, health centre, Sainsbury's supermarket and local shops
- A hotel
- A care village
- Sustainable transport provision including cycle ways
- Sports facilities and playing fields
- Public open spaces

(retrieved on 15th December 2021 from https://eddington-cambridge.co.uk/about-us/our-vision-and-history)

In this chapter, we introduce the University of Cambridge Primary School (UCPS), the first University Training School in the United Kingdom. We explain the theoretical principles upon which our curriculum design, values and ethos are built and draw from practical implementation of democracy in education. The beginning of a story:

BOX 2: The ground-breaking at the school

It was a cold wintry November in 2014. The senior academics at Cambridge University gathered on the damp muddy field on the Northwest of Cambridge, U.K. The only colour, mimicking the memory of wildflowers in Summer, were the yellow hard hats worn by those attending the ceremony. The easterly wind blew. The Vice Chancellor walked with the lead architect and Headteacher-designate to the seemingly significant position on the barren soil and, awkwardly trying to hold the shovel together, dug the first hole. The ground-breaking ceremony is a tradition with builders – to break the ground of a new building is a significant moment. In the 800 years' history of the ancient University, this was its first adventure to run a primary school. The Vice Chancellor smiled and, directing his speech to the crowd, said: "Mr Biddulph, our inaugural Headteacher, for our school… excellence is the only option".

2 UCPS within the current education system in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, schools are either publicly funded and free to parents or independent, and charge fees to the parents of the students. Each country within the United Kingdom has devolved responsibility for its education system. There are, however, fundamental similarities in the UK education system. All boys and girls must attend full-time education until the age of 18. Many students stay on

at school after that age to prepare themselves for university or other careers. There are also significant divergences between practice in England and Wales, on the one hand, and in Scotland. Schools are run by a group called governors, although increasingly this is changing with government policy.

This simple divide of state/public and private/independent was made more complicated during the early 21st century as Labour and then Conservative governments encouraged market forces as a strategy to improve the quality of education. Since 2010, the education system in the United Kingdom has been subject to significant changes. This meant that due to bulge demographic school aged children, the need for more schools became apparent and the government invited applications from business and parents' groups to set up new schools. Local Authorities, which are local level government, used to maintain schools and be responsible and accountable for them no longer had control.

During this turbulent period, in which teachers and school leaders were vilified by politicians for lack of vision and during which teachers rose to professionalise themselves through the start of the official professional body – The Chartered College of Teaching – many schools were run by new charitable trusts. Whilst "not for profit" the contentious management of public education by essentially private trusts caused alarm.

The system has many accountability mechanisms within it as an attempt to improve standards in education. The Office for Education Standards (Ofsted) is the office which holds school trusts, headteachers and governors to account for the quality of education in schools. Their purpose is to make sure that organisations providing education, training and care services in England do so to a high standard for children and students; to carry out inspections and regulatory visits throughout England and publish the results online; to report directly to Parliament.[1]

Ofsted's responsibilities include:

Inspecting
- maintained schools and academies, some independent schools, and many other educational institutions and programmes outside of higher education
- childcare, adoption and fostering agencies and initial teacher training

Regulating
- a range of early years and children's social care services, making sure they're suitable for children and potentially vulnerable young people

Reporting
- publishing reports of our findings so they can be used to improve the overall quality of education and training
- informing policymakers about the effectiveness of these services[2]

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1 See: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about
2 Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about

If readers look on social media, like Twitter, or google the views of Ofsted they will see the emotive responses to the inspectorate. Overtime, its policies and ways of working have eroded trust in the profession – quoting Ofsted's own research:

> "Overall opinion of Ofsted has fallen since last year. Agreement that Ofsted acts as a reliable and trusted arbiter has fallen from 35% in 2018 to 18% [in 2019]. But, for the most part, teachers are not more likely to disagree but to choose neither agree nor disagree" (YouGov, 2019)

The system is essentially "high stakes and low support"; it is a system where good inspections result in a collective sigh of relief and poor inspections lead, often time, to the resignation or removal of senior leaders and Headteachers. The contradiction is that governments want a robust and perceived rigid application of curricula and standard testing as well as seeking school leaders and teachers to be innovative. This creates an educational tightrope to balance a journey for the best outcomes for children – it is not easy and it requires considerable brave leadership. Within this heavily politicized and ideological backdrop, an idea for University-run schools came to the fore and several universities in the U.K. applied to open schools that were to be Free Schools. In the end, only two Universities were granted the license to pursue their efforts to open schools: one secondary school in Birmingham and one primary school in Cambridge.

In October 2014, the Registrary of the University of Cambridge received formal notification from the Free Schools Group in the Department for Education (DfE) that, in the view of the Minister for Schools, Cambridge could move to the approval stage and that the University "should therefore proceed" to (what is known in officialise as) the "pre-opening phase" of its proposed University Training School (UTS) (Gronn & Biddulph, 2016). It was to be a school with a new vision for education. It was to be ambitious, innovative and inclusive. The notion of a "free" school comes from the Chartered College schools in the United States of America and the Friskolar in Sweden (Winter, 2010, p. 51). As we explained above, in the U.K. context, the very notion of freedom in a school is called to question, given the hyper-accountability school cultures and often arbitrary and rigid inspectorate upon which schools are judged.

There is a very real tension: that on the one hand, governments want schools to be bold and ambitious, to innovate the system, and yet on the other hand, keep schools accountable by often narrow systems and structures. Within this context, as we sketched the University of Cambridge Primary School's purpose and curriculum design, we needed to ask:

• How bold and innovative can we be?
• How will we ensure we challenge the status quo without damaging the reputation or scope of influence that would come with a negative view of the school from the inspectorate?

- Where are the tensions and how do we allow them to remain so and when do we mitigate or accept limitations?
- Can a school be democratic?
- How does research interface with practice and vice versa?
- Is it possible for teachers to be researching practitioners given all the work they do in class and in running their classrooms?
- Could the role of the Headteacher or Principal be evolved so that he/she is of the highest academic standing commensurate with professors in academic departments?

James Biddulph, one of the authors of this chapter, is the inaugural Headteacher of the school and had the complex role of defining a vision for the school prior to it even being built. In one of his journal entries he wrote to explore the challenges ahead:

BOX 3: Reflections from the inaugural Headteacher

It is odd being a Headteacher without a school building, staff or children. Walking around the skeletal structure of our school, it is hard to imagine the conversations between adult and child, to see playtime through the round courtyard, to hear singing, the normal chatter of school life. It is hard to consider the practicalities. Our vision is compelling, I think, but how will we release it from the printed page? Where will the imagination fly? How will we celebrate? What is really possible in a high stakes accountability educational context? How will we realize the potentials for every child, teacher and member of community? How do I lead the way?

I remember being on a bus in India and reading Maxine Greene's work about releasing the imagination and of social imagination. The school needs a compelling vision that (a) sets out the purpose as a primary school and (b) bridges the towers of knowledge at the University and also the shared wisdom inherent in our teaching practices across the globe and (c) influences the future of education through its building of partnerships and research practice – it must be a Centre of Possibilities. Whatever that means?

(from my Headteacher's journal, April, 2015)

When we opened in 2015, achieving the broader vision of the school, knowing that a high reputational risk in the form of the government inspector was to visit each term and then formally within 2 years with externally graded judgements about the school put considerable pressure on the school leaders. With a short timescale amid the shifting sands of government policy, it was a difficult balancing act. In the background of our school developments, funding per student has been reduced year-on-year in real terms; teacher education continues to be reformed and currently a new Initial Teacher Training review is underway (called interestingly, the "Market Review") with the suggestion that universities are no longer at the centre of the process. Be that as it may, the University of Cambridge

now has the foundations of an excellent primary school and a key pillar of its new community.

UCPS was designed and the expectations upon it were to function as: an inspiring learning community centred on a research-informed approach; aiming to provide a high quality and depth of education for children and families; to be a ground-breaking and innovative learning community with an explicit focus on exemplary teaching and learning practice. Rather than emulating how the Dewey Chicago schools had been conceived (see Rallison & Gronn, 2016, p. 8), it was this research function that was intended as the school's distinctive University Training School element. It was vital that research informed practice would aspire to varying levels of impact: local, regional and national in England, so as to align with the anticipated UTS contribution sought by the Government and DfE.

3 Building a University Training Schools in Cambridge, UK

There are only two University Training Schools in the United Kingdom: a primary school in Cambridge and a secondary school in Birmingham, the University of Birmingham Secondary School. They are both different in their context and vision and purpose. In this section, we briefly explain how we are uniquely different in the way we have constructed our work and purpose.

Many schools across the country work with universities; they work through Post Graduate teacher courses, preparing new teachers for the profession and engaging in some research work, where the school is the site of case studies or data gathering. There is no tradition of a school being solely run by a university; this is where the unique structure of the UCPS is seen. Prior to opening, researchers examined the history of research in education and how universities had engaged with schools (Gronn & Biddulph, 2016) and yet we also looked to the USA to understand how laboratory schools were developed.

UCPS is different from the USA models partly because the legal structures of running schools demarcate responsibilities clearly: schools are funded centrally from the government and there is no additional funding from the University (in the Cambridge school context), they are inspected by Ofsted which has considerable power over them and yet they are also independent (which UCPS was as a Free School). The complexity in the system meant that the school needed to establish itself with a confident vision to build on the expectations of the world class University – essentially we needed to mark our course and set sail to a destination aware that the wind may be blowing in the opposite direction (the wind being Ofsted and Government policy!).

The school works in three ways. Firstly, it is a primary school for young children between the ages of 4 and 11. Secondly, through the professional development

processes of lesson study and of engaging with academic expertise at the University of Cambridge, to develop research-informed practitioners who are empowered to make evidence-based decisions because they are highly reflective and ambitious in a socially imaginative way. This is where the work of Maxine Greene shines through. For example, the school is working with Usha Goswami in developing understanding about dyslexia and the teaching methods which may aid better outcomes for dyslexic learners. Thirdly, the school is to become a centre for research – and as this chapter was being written, the concept for a Centre for Educational Possibilities has grown (see www.possibilities.org.uk). This centre aims to advance thinking about education and teaching/learning to respond to the challenges of the day: climate change, children's sense of purpose and fracturing democratic communities and systems. Taken as a trinity, the University of Cambridge Primary School aspires to reimagine the professionalism of educators, to shine a light on the vital importance of developing teachers' capacity to reflect, assess and engage students differently and to add innovation into a system that is not adequately responding to the 21st century context in which students will learn, grow and live.

4 Creating an enabling space for a new democratic school

> **BOX 4: Reflections from the inaugural Headteacher**
>
> Leading a school, whether new or established, is as much about developing systems and considering the practicalities as it is about the vision and ethos. But the vision is the route map and the ethos the spirit that guides the way; without these there are only buildings and practicalities.
>
> In my journal reflection above I raised questions about the challenge of articulating a school vision and the vital role of leadership that is about communicating and orchestrating a compelling vision (Novak et al., 2014, pp. 3-16), and developing a rich context to lead *educational lives* for us all. As the metal structure wound its way out from the fields that were once the University's farm, our vision circled in our minds and conversations, discussed between governors and our new staff, rehearsed and evolving as we attempted to understand how we could *Release the Imagination and Celebrate the Art of the Possible*. How did we arrive at this strap-line? How did we form our approach? What principles guided our decisions?

Democracy is about people's lives. People experience the world through the stories they tell about themselves and their communities. The world is essentially storied. This is the story of a school in Cambridge, U.K., which focuses on *human beings and enabling the very best for them*. This, surely, is an obvious statement that is at once unassuming and yet also raises the very real question: aren't all schools focused on people? Or have they been forced to focus on the systems, often tech-

nocratic, that generate the procedures, define the expectations, and set the goals of the purpose of education? Or in asking such questions, have we fallen into the trap of polarised discourse?

Alongside concerns around the crises of western democracies facing unprecedented threat, education by its nature, carries with it the hope for an alternative. Working back from the values, knowledges, skills and dispositions we need citizens of the future to carry with them, we can begin to consider how much the way we educate needs to change. Alongside core foundations of cognitive, health and emotional development, learners need to be given the opportunity to develop "transformative competencies" where they are able to shape their world with agency and work towards longer term goals for themselves and others (Howells, 2018). We were inspired by the first *Learning without Limits* study (Hart et al., 2004) and subsequent Creating *Learning without Limits* (Swann et al., 2012), realising that principled action and leadership that can enable inclusive learning for all children and teachers. These principles aligned with those of the *Cambridge Primary Review*, the largest study into primary education in the United Kingdom since the 1960s, focused on the importance of developing:

• Trust
• Co-agency
• An ethic of "everybody"

Creating Learning without Limits (Swann et al., 2012) identified seven key leadership dispositions for building an inclusive culture of challenge and success; in setting up the school, we created policies to inform practice that attended to these dispositions. They each relate to leadership in the broadest sense and include young people as leaders alongside class teachers and senior leaders. These dispositions are summarised in Table 1:

Tab 1: Seven key leadership dispositions (Swann et al., 2012, p. 88)

Seven key dispositions that increase the capacity for professional learning.		States of mind that inhibit learning
Openness to ideas, to possibilities, to surprise	not	belief that there is one right way, that outcomes are predictable
Questioning restlessness, humility	not	reliance on certainties and ready-made solutions

Inventiveness creative responses to challenges	not	compliance with imposed models and materials
Persistence courage, humility	not	settling for easy answers, rejecting complexity
Emotional stability taking risks and resistance	not	fear of failure, fear of trying new things
Generosity welcoming difference	not	deficit thinking, desire for uniformity
Empathy mutual supportiveness	not	fear, defensiveness, blame

The key questions for us were:

- How do we enable a space, in the context of a hyper-accountability UK education system, that allows for teacher agency, trust and an inclusive ethic of everybody?
- What would our policies include and what would they exclude?
- How can leaders tread the tightrope of vision and accountability so that both are given sufficient attention to keep the school true to its purpose as well as safe from the external accountability agendas?

To respond to these concerns, we returned to theoretical principles upon which we built our practice. Inspired by John Dewey and most significantly, Maxine Greene, we developed the concept of imagination as a socially enacted force for change. The connection between an 800 hundred-year old world-class university and a brand new primary school wedded the vision for our school that built relationships between theory and practice, not as polarities in the educational discourse but rather as a symbiotic relationship: it was about *theorising practice* and *practising theory* (Burnard et al., 2015).

5 Introducing our theoretical positioning

Finding the language to express our vision for the new school, in a politically divergent lexicon, was both challenging and necessary. Philosophers John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein understood the centrality of language *as practice* – that it is something we do and live by. Over the last two decades the language of education has transformed into a language of learning (e.g., learner-centred, assessment for learning, children described as learners rather than children). This

change involves a repositioning of the relationship between teacher and child, and raises questions about authority, knowledge, curriculum and voice. Whose knowledge? Which knowledge is valued? By whom? And how does a school construct relationships that are rooted in values that help to create a learning environment in which everyone achieves?

As with the *Cambridge Primary Review* (Alexander, 2010), *Learning without Limits* (Hart et al., 2004) and *Creating Learning without Limits* (Swann et al., 2012), we wanted our school vision to be principled on empirical research and democratic at its core. We believe in an educational experience that is about developing a "shared, hopeful vision that pays attention to the diversity of perspectives in the human community" (Novak et al., 2014, p. 5) and which challenges traditional notions of children's ability as fixed to versions of *transformability*. This means that rather than thinking children are born with a predetermined "amount" of ability, with a response from teachers to teach to that ability, the notion of transformability emphasises the hopeful belief that through the right support and educational experiences EVERY learner has the possibility to transform, to become, to learn better, to learn something new. It reminds of a moment in a class room:

BOX 5: Interaction between Ismail (teacher) and Francis (child) (both pseudonyms)

Francis: I don't like music because I can't sing.
Ismail: Who told you you cannot sing?
Francis: My friends did and said that I was not good.
Ismail: Really?
Francis: Yes and also my grandma said I was not a natural singer…she was laughing and not being mean but…
Ismail: Look Francis, we all have our own talents but everyone has a voice and everyone can breathe and that is what singing is. You breathe in and you make your vocal chords work. We can all learn to sing, we just need to give it a go and try.

And in the next box, two contrasting examples of teachers' views about ability and transformability:

> **BOX 6: Ability labelling versus transformability**
>
> *Example 1*: A class where ability is seen as fixed
> Children are grouped into ability. There are five groups of six children. The children do not move groups during the year. The groups are called: Tortoise, Turtle, Cat, Hare, Eagle. These are bottom to top ability (bottom being Tortoise and top being Eagle. The children are given different tasks. Typically, children in Tortoise group are given easy tasks and children in Eagle group are given challenging tasks. Everyone knows what the groups mean. This created a fixed mindset of learner ability. The evidence from primary and secondary education suggests that, overall, structured ability grouping (streaming and setting), of itself, has no positive impact on average attainment, although, depending on the level of curriculum differentiation, can widen the gap between low and high attainers (Higgins et al., 2016).
> *Example 2*: A class where transformability is seen
> Children do not have fixed groups unless for organization of children around the space (e.g. to find where their books and pencils are located). Children are invited to choose their own level of challenge (in one school this is called Spicy, Chilli, Super Spicy). All children can have an attempt at the most challenging task and they are supported to work together, to use resources and seek advice as needed. Teachers carefully and sensitively support different learning needs and knowing children well, will explain which task would be best suited for them. Children have agency. They do mini exit tests to show the teacher they have understood. They talk about their mistakes in a positive way and show how they have grappled with the challenges in the learning. They edit their own learning outcomes.
> James Biddulph and Luke Rolls have both worked in schools where these examples have been taken. The impact on children's learner attitude is considerably more positive in the second example. This is how UCPS aims to work with all its children.

The idea is to develop a school community of people who are reflective, aspirational and actively engaged educators; and equally, children who were central to the principles as co-constructors of *their* educational experience. Moreover, "we see our educational responsibility as a responsibility for the humanity of the human being" (Biesta, 2006, p. 106) – that there was a higher purpose, as well as the important logistics and practicalities of teaching the basics of reading, writing and mathematics.

Our vision came from educational theorists considered answers to the questions about the purpose of an education and importantly, the value of imperative of a democratic education. Maxine Greene's work especially resonated, bringing to light the responsibility of educators to find ways to *re-position perspectives* through an active engagement with open-space-making. In *Releasing the Imagination* (Greene, 2000), Greene advocates that teachers model the provocation to learners to pose their own questions and "name their worlds" (Greene, 2000, p. 58). Her focus was on inclusion, asking big questions, considering alternatives, developing a mind-set to release the possibilities inherent in the human imagination – to

improve each child's opportunities to enjoy a happy, connected, choice-rich and contributing human life. Her emancipatory vision of education related to and informed our focus on student voice, diverse life experiences and the influence of school structures on children's educational experiences.

We eventually defined our aims as founded on three pillars of *ambition*, *innovation* and *inclusion*:

- Ambitious: everyone will be encouraged and enabled to achieve and attain highly;
- Innovative: the learning community will benefit from belonging to a research and teacher education community both within the school itself and as part of wider University and school partnerships;
- Inclusive: diversity will be welcomed in a caring environment where everybody will be valued.

Within a democratic education, we teach children that learning is not a competition; rather to inspire everyone to strive and learn from mistakes. We foster our three principles of ambition, innovation and inclusion through a culture in five school values that we identified and which are explicitly and implicitly taught within a democratic community. We want every voice to be valued and everyone empowered to be the best that he or she can be. Our view of democracy translated into the importance of collaboration – so that together everyone achieves more. Beneath our three aims, we developed five virtues or values that would guide our policies and approach to teaching and learning, behaviour management and various other practical matters. They were:

- Empathy: listening carefully to others, learning together for the benefit of all;
- Respect: treating everyone with dignity;
- Trust: building relationships with a shared vision;
- Courage: developing resilience, determination and releasing the imagination to develop possibility-thinking attitudes;
- Gratitude: acknowledging one another with good manners, with thoughtfulness and consideration for each member of our community, and the contribution they make.

6 The challenges of practice: how to enable democratic practices in schools?

Biddulph, Flutter and Rolls (2022) ask the question: is democracy dead? Or at least on life support? Given the challenges we see in democratic systems across the world, in the way information is used and misinformation is spread for political gain, questions about educating *through* democracy and *for* democracy become central. A starting point for considering how far democracy in education can be

revived is in the ways educators position themselves and their roles in the class-room.

So called "Traditional-leaning" educators have long emphasised "core knowledge" approaches that situate learners as "novices" and emphasise maximizing the efficiency of instructional approaches to develop knowledge. The aims are to help children to be imbued with an understanding of the world that will equip them best for the future. Many have questioned within this approach, which or whose knowledges are defined, selected and considered worthy to being taught. There is an implication with these models of learning that dialogic forms of teaching are less valuable at this earlier stage of education because children need to know more before they can meaningfully participate in critical debate and thinking. One counter-argument to this line of thought is the reality that, to date, such an education does not appear to have created a world able to cope with the current physical, social, political and environmental threats the world currently faces. There is concern from many that market forces of modern capitalist societies create a world where democracy is essentially truncated by profit incentive neo-liberal systems. Is it possible to have democracy in education within this political context?

Jürgen Oelkers disagrees that schools can be democratic because he says there is a difference between the principles of democracy and the requirements of education. It is disingenuous to say that consulting children about the curriculum gives them the same voice and agency as the government, which in fact sets the expectation and requirements of the work in schools. Illustrating this difficulty further, Biesta's (2010) reading of Oelkers' position shows that, "as soon as the curriculum would be opened up for democratic contestation and negotiation, it would "dissolve into separate, individual interests" (Oelkers, 2000, p. 5). In such a situation, "everyone would pick out the education he or she needed but would not be *educated*…and would never have been subjected to the standards that a real education demands" (Oelkers, 2000 in Biesta, 2010, p. 94). One way to consider how democracy is possible in education is to re-situate curriculum aims and implementation by returning to first principles of participation, redistribution and representation (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018).

We argue in this chapter that democratic competencies in children need to be fostered from a young age and that by not doing so until children gain the right to vote is in essence, too late. To disenfranchise children as they currently are, goes against both fundamental principles of democracy as well as their human right to have their voice heard, represented and taken seriously. We propose that, rather, opportunities need to be given for children's habits and dispositions to be systematically nurtured. When children are fully active citizens in society, they will then be able to do so with a more sophisticated and critical ability to question themselves, others and the types of knowledge they are presented with. It is naïve to think of education as being a neutral activity that does not influence children

into ways of thinking. Educators themselves are required by their state to enact government policy and so by proxy become agents who are under various factors of influence in their role. Educators interested in democratic schooling have a duty to guard education against undue influence, protect children's right to explore independent thought and allow them to develop crucial learning autonomy. We propose three foundational practices for implementing democratic principles into practice: Children's Voices; Curriculum; Pedagogies and Assessment.

6.1 Enabling children's voices

Power lies at the heart of those whose voices are loudest and heard. In a democratic education, adults are required to use their own power to be advocates for all voices to be heard and enacted upon. Adults become advocates to represent children's interests, as well as they are able to, alongside having the humility to accept that they may not always "know best". Adults hold the power of decision making but equally the power to re-distribute this to children to enquire into what they need. Noddings (2005) makes a useful distinction here between *inferred needs* that tell us what adults think is best for children and *expressed needs* where children themselves talk about the things that they believe they need. Both are important and both with obvious pitfalls. Adults can never accurately claim to understand the diversities of children in a school and their backgrounds, feelings, experience and hopes for the future. And on the other side, to allow children to have a complete say how a school runs would negate the expertise and experience that adults have as professionals. Misconceptions about what children's voices often include these types of ideas of adult abandoning judgement and that listening to children's voice will equate to children choosing whatever they want to learn and how they will learn it. This is the tension that Oelkers warned against.

Attending to children's voices requires a nuanced and critical approach. It involves adults understanding that their children teach them on their own "blind spots" about how school is really experienced by them, not just as it was intended to be experienced. Children are given a meaningful say in shaping their environment and curriculum so that it proactively includes them. There is a negotiation between adults and children, where appropriate, to determine what relationships, ethos and spaces look like and feel like. To achieve this, adults recognize the need to listen, not just more, but differently. Adults understand that children's conation to talk is mediated by the invisible norms that exist in a school and take responsibility for make these enabling for children to feel heard. This has been called the "hidden curriculum" – the values and expectations that lie beneath what is taught and what is expected to be experienced. In the United Kingdom, it is intertwined with complex issues of class, ethnicity and economics – the system, it could be argued, propagates a white-middle class agenda. At the most simple level, children

need to feel safe enough to talk and take up the courageous act of making their voice heard.

An example of the ways children's voices can be heard and their ideas valued, Box 1 describes the setting up of a school newspaper. Agency, Trust and Community are key features. Aimee Durning is a Director of Inclusion at the school (having previously been a Teaching Assistant). During the pandemic in which UK schools were closed for extended periods, she was concerned to find ways for children to maintain a sense of community and connection.

BOX 7: Children's voices during a national lockdown

On the 4th January 2021, the English government announced that the country would overnight be plunged into another period of national lockdown. As I cycled to school the following day many thoughts filled my head. Thoughts such as:

How would those children without siblings manage at home for many weeks?

What could we do in school to build bridges between school and home or from home to home and back to school again?

What lessons had we learnt from the previous lockdown of 2020?

The main thought that played constantly on a loop was, "How could we create or maintain a child-led community when the majority of our children were at home?"

It was decided that we would offer a historical opportunity, during a global pandemic, for some of our children in school to create a com-munity newspaper. Six children were selected from the year 5 and 6 school bubble. Children who were being educated at home were of-fered the opportunity to take part in this project. These children were selected through invite-only by myself, a teaching assistant who had an understanding of their skills and what they could offer to this com-munity project. I was in a unique position as a teaching assistant be-cause I didn't have to consider the normal classroom pedagogies and behaviours. This group would be allowed to grow organically. I could attempt to discover an optimum democratic environment where crea-tivities would grow.

My hopes were that the newspaper would be as democratic as possible and that the children would be Allowed the time and the space to come to their own agreements. This process would allow for all members to have a voice, opinion, and a say in how the meetings operated and the end result, publication of The Storey. Without adult intervention or per-suasion. I asked the children if they would like someone to lead the newspaper team. 10 out of the 11 said "no way"; it was a team effort with only one child stating that she hoped to be the leader. The others would however not allow this. It appeared that this small group of children would make decisions on what the majority wished for.

During the project the children met in many rooms across the school. Twice a week they met altogether via Microsoft Teams. Or the in-school team would meet to discuss and finalise that week's publica-tion.

The first meeting happened on a grey day in January. Myself and a colleague de-cided that we would observe from a distance and not in-terfere in the children's discussion or thinking. We invited the chil-dren to come to one of the school's spacious seminar rooms and sit around the boardroom table. The adults in the room sat back and watched the chaos unfold!

The children spoke at speed and very loudly over one another. My colleague, a teacher, sat with me and on more than one occasion, I had to prevent him from interfering with the child lead process. This was not how I had imagined their first meeting would be as I cycled to work that day!

"So can we just be quiet and everyone put their hand up."
"No one is writing. Why is no one writing?
"What question are you up to lady?"
"Listen, I have a system….I have an idea so we don't keep talk-ing over one another…..like in philosophy."
Robert sat with his palm, resting on the table, facing up. He ges-tured to his up turned hand.

Sadly, the group, except one of the year 5 children, ignored him and carried on talking. Talking over one another. The excitement was tan-gible. This was a demonstration of children being children. I could liken it to excited conversa-tions on the playground when the children were learning a new game or had news to share. None of the children appeared to be offended by the constant in-terrupting or raised voices. They appeared to take on roles naturally depending on their skill sets. Some were happy to write articles and research news stories. Whilst others wished to carry out interviews or create puzzles and write jokes.

Within the boardroom structure, one child always attempted to lead the discus-sion and be in charge of the direction of conversation. This environment was not particularly democratic. Those members of the group who were identified as having certain vulnerabilities were at a real disadvantage to their peers in this setting.

On occasions when the in-school team met with the children at home, they would naturally form a semi-circle around one computer. At this point they would suggest and agree that one person should do the talk-ing and work through the agenda points. The semi-circle then framed the lone child who spoke to the children on the screen. This environ-ment reduced talk regardless of how many times the child doing the talking attempted to include the others in the group. Some children stated that they disliked virtual conversations and much preferred face to face dialogue.

> The optimum environment was discovered by the children during an impromptu meeting one Friday. The children suggested to me that they should meet to discuss the edition that was due for community circula-tion that Friday afternoon. As we stepped into one of the school's empty classrooms, the children naturally sat in a circle on the floor. One child decided to sit on a chair rather than the floor. As the chil-dren sat on the floor with no barriers between them, they took turns to talk. Dialogue appeared to ripple around the circle, they were no cha-otic shouts witnessed previously in the boardroom. Each child ap-peared to accept that they would have to speak, offer an opinion or share their contri-bution. In the circle the children appeared to scaffold one another's understand-ing and fill in any missing background in-formation. Furthermore, the circle offered their individual vulnerabili-ties, there was nowhere to hide. This was the time when the group had to support one another to reach their desired goals.

As well as defining what an effective education could be, examples of practice like this one raise questions about individual responsibility and the democratic values of tolerance and fairness, respect and rule of law are increasingly emphasized in government policy. When children are given space and time and when teachers stand back as a stranger, as Maxine Greene would say, it is possible to release the social imagination. This is not easy. It is in many if not most educators' DNA to step forward and try and facilitate learning, to help, to resolve and to make decisions for the common good. What Aimee did was to create that enabling space of trust, co-agency and the ethic of inclusion and considering everybody, that gave rise to children speaking their realities.

In the next section, we focus on the formal aspects of our work in attempting to create a democratic education – or at least opportunities for democratic engagement within our school curriculum.

6.2 Designing a democratic curriculum

When we consider the manner in which curricula are often designed: by a particular group of adults and often shaped by political influence, it is perhaps not surprising to learn that curriculum is often experienced as something that failed to represent the children it was created for. Fraser and Jaeggi's (2018) principles of redistribution, recognition and representation are key lenses to understand what curriculum offer all children get, whether it is equitable, representative of their needs and positively works with promoting protective characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, [dis]ability, gender and sexual orientation.

Considering curriculum design and content though is not just a matter of what is being taught; it is also crucially how it is taught and how children experience it. Takahashi (2021) notes that between the intended, implemented and attained curriculum, there is space: between that which is intended and implemented and

between that which is implemented and attained. In exploring these spaces, educators can better plan for understanding what happens in their teaching interactions. Are educators able to anticipate children's responses, make contingency plans for these and capture the impact of the implemented curriculum? How were children's responses different from those which were expected? How should teaching be adapted for the future? What did children say about what they learned and how the learning took place? What suggestions did they give as active agents of their learning about their learning experience could be improved?

Our curriculum design evolved over time and was built on the theoretical and research informed principles from the *Cambridge Primary Review, Learning without Limits* and the work of Maxine Greene and John Dewey. As such, our principled approach to designing our curriculum is at its heart, rooted in democratic notions of education (Dewey, 1916; Greene, 2000; Freire, 2018; Hart et al, 2004; Swann et al, 2012) in which children's voice is central: in which we empower children to make sense of the complex world in which they live (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004); in developing their ability to question; to discuss, challenge and contest diverse positions respectfully and compassionately; and to consider views about our world and how we should live in it. There is a critical thinking nature so that we question assumptions about truth and knowledge. In understanding the intercultural communities in which we live, there is a need for children to learn with the diversities that exist in their local and global communities; inspired by the words of Lord Williams

> "If you're going to be a decision-making citizen, you need to know how to make sense and how to recognise when someone is making sense…that there are different ways of making sense, different sorts of questions to ask about the world we're in, and insofar as those questions are pursued with integrity and seriousness they should be heard seriously and charitably" (Lord Williams, 2008; quoted in Alexander 2010, p. 13)

At the core of our curriculum is the hope to nurture and develop compassionate citizens who want to make a positive contribution to their local and global worlds. The curriculum passionately advocates to inspire a relentless optimism for and about children.

6.3 The enabling space of our curriculum: relationships and ethos

In order to develop compassionate citizens for now and the future, we realise that the ways we engage with children informally and formally throughout their time in school spaces and how they are engaged with at home, will determine how the principles are enacted and "lived out". In the UK, the Warwick Commission Report (2015) reminds us that, globally, our education systems should be creative learning landscapes, infused with possibility spaces (Colucci-Gray et al., 2017). So, we aim to develop enabling spaces for possibilities to arise; spaces construct-

ed collaboratively; that foster agency, communality and engender trust so that children can learn to make sense of uncertainties and complexities in learning. Following on from Learning without Limits (Hart et al., 2004) and Creating Learning without Limits (Swann et al., 2012) and aligned with the Cambridge Primary Review recommendations, the enabling space in our school is developed with trust, co-agency and an ethic of everybody as its foundations.

We define this enabling space as one infused with values of empathy, respect, trust, courage and gratitude. These are the guiding values of the school. Furthermore, there is also a range of evidence investigating the environmental contexts that support the development of children's playfulness, oral language and other representational abilities, and their development as self-regulating learners. Broadly, this research (see Whitebread et al., 2015) indicates the importance of an emotionally warm and positive social climate in the classroom, of high expectations and challenge, of support for children's sense of autonomy and competence, and of opportunities for metacognitive talk when emotional and cognitive mental processes are articulated and discussed.

An enabling space also refers to the architectural structures and also the ways in which schools can evolve their spaces, even if these are old and not fit for 21st Century learners. The school was created with key principles of flexibility, democracy and safety (both physically safe but also in creating spaces which children could feel inspired to learn more). The design was research based and deliberately led by education principals established by University of Cambridge Education Faculty, such that learning could take place everywhere, inside and out. Despite being a large 3 classes of entry (e.g. three class of thirty children in Year 1, 2, 3 etc) the desire was that it could be divided into smaller communities while still being part of a united whole.

This led to a circular-plan formed by three classroom clusters of six classrooms, plus an early years cluster and a two storey block of all the common parts; creating the unifying central courtyard where the whole school can gather. The courtyard also makes a nod to Cambridge's historic courtyards, but differs from traditional courtyards in that it opens up to the playground and landscape beyond. It is enclosed yet open. Every classroom is articulated in plan, has no doors and opens on one side to a shared learning street and on the other onto a covered outdoor learning space. This controlled openness facilitates not only children's learning but also adult learning, teacher training and research that also takes place in the school. The seamless connection between inside and outside allows learning to effortlessly move beyond the classroom, following forest school principles. How does this thinking about school design allow children and educators the opportunities to think differently? In particular, how are the relationships nurtured in a democratic space that is physically and philosophically created for this purpose? How does a

space foster a sense of children's agency? How is freedom and community brought together through the architectural decisions?

In these ways, the relationships forged through the explicit nurturing of our school values creates the enabling space which contextualises the curriculum design and the learning and teaching within it (see the golden framing of our curriculum model).

Photo: University of Cambridge Primary School

6.4 Research-informed curriculum design: three pedagogic golden threads of our curriculum

From our review of the literature, and building from the work of the Faculty of Education, Cambridge University, we identify three golden threads that bind the curriculum together: Habits of Mind, Dialogue and Oracy, and Playful Enquiry. Brought together, these threads strengthen our focus on developing children as independent autonomous learners who can self-regulate well; who are articulate, confident and able to express their views respectfully and intelligently; who are curious, creative and playful in ways that deepens knowledge and understanding of the world.
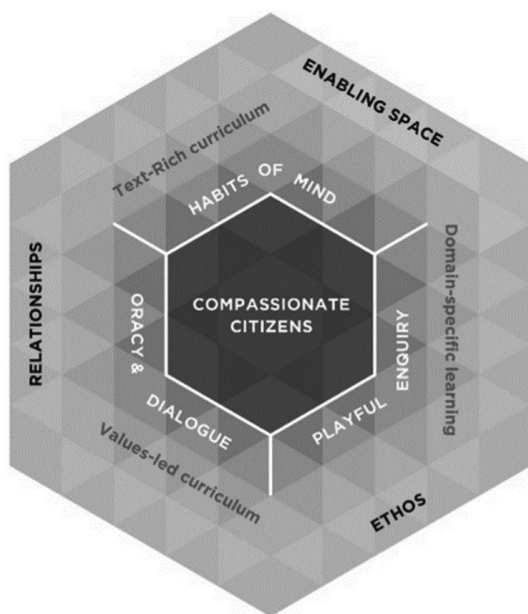
Fig. 1: UCPS Curriculum Model

First golden thread: Habits of Mind

The term "Habits of Mind" was used by Costa and Kallick (2008) who outlined and described sixteen psychological attributes and problem solving skills which when utilised aid the learning process. These attributes range from developing resilience when faced with new and unknown situations to reducing one's impulsivity. Costa and Kallick (2008) identify six dimensions: Value, Inclination, Sensitivity, Capability, Commitment and Policy and that it is the progression through these dimensions that see children be the problem solvers of the future.

The wide-ranging facets that Habits of Mind incorporate allow teachers to adapt their practice in the classroom to encourage children's metacognitive understanding and mental flexibility when solving problems. For example, having discussions with children about how they know what they know and supporting them to develop strategies that they can draw on in their learning. Having an understanding of how they think enables children to develop both short and longer term learning dispositions (Chatzipanteli et al., 2014).

Second golden thread: Oracy and Dialogue

Within the context of a profoundly interconnected world facing various challenges, complex communication skills are widely recognised as invaluable characteristics of productive and intercultural citizens (Autor et al., 2003). Embedded within

school curriculum learning, is the potential for learners to develop an ability to articulate thinking within a shared space with others; speakers and listeners "inter-think" by building on the ideas of their own and others (Alexander, 2008). Dialogue has been defined as the "kind of talk in which every answer gives rise to another question" (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2016). Evidence-based approaches employed at the University Primary School, such as Philosophy for Children enable learners to create and discuss their own questions, change their minds and use their peers as effective instructional resources (Gorard et al., 2018). Within this dialogic space, the importance of learners being "caring, collaborative, critical and creative" is emphasised (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2016). As such, dialogue is understood as reliant on and mediated by productive learner habits of mind such as reciprocity and developed cooperative learning skills (Vrikki et al., 2019).

Using the Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework (Mercer et al., 2017), which sets out a comprehensive overview of the Physical, Linguistic, Cognitive and Social and Emotional aspects of effective dialogue, teachers are able to set out clear "dialogic intention" for planning and assessing learning sequences, and work with systematically developing these.

Tab. 2: Cambridge Oracy Framework (taken from Mercer et al., 2017)

Physical	
Voice	Fluency and pace of speech Tonal variation Clarity of pronunciation Voice projection
Body Language	Gesture and posture Facial expression and eye contact
Cognitive	
Content	Choice of content to convey meaning and intention Building on the views of others
Structure	Structure and organisation of task
Clarifying and Summarising	Seeking information and clarification through questioning Summarising
Reasoning	Giving reasons to support views Critically examining ideas and views expressed
Linguistic	
Vocabulary	Appropriate vocabulary choice

Language	Register Grammar
Rhetorical Techniques	Rhetorical techniques such as metaphor, humour, irony, and mimicry
Social and Emotional	
Working with Others	Guiding or managing interactions Turn-taking
Listening and Responding	Listening actively and responding appropriately
Confidence in Speaking	Self-assurance Liveliness and flair
Audience Awareness	Taking account of level of understanding of the audience

Third golden thread: Playful Enquiry

There are several strands of evidence which all point towards the importance of play in young children's development, and the value of an extended period of playful learning before the start of formal schooling. These arise from anthropological, psychological, neuroscientific and educational studies. A range of anthropological studies of children's play in extant hunter-gatherer societies (Gray, 2009) and evolutionary psychology studies of play in the young of other mammalian species (Smith, 2006) have identified play as an adaptation strategy which evolved in early human social groups that enabled humans to become powerful learners and problem-solvers. Neuroscientific studies have supported this view of play as a central mechanism in learning. Pellis and Pellis (2009), for example, have reviewed many studies showing that playful activity leads to synaptic growth, particularly in the frontal cortex, that part of the brain responsible for all the uniquely human higher mental functions. A range of experimental psychology studies has also consistently demonstrated the superior learning and motivation arising from playful as opposed to instructional approaches to learning in children (Sylva et al., 1976; Pellegrini & Gustafson, 2005; Whitebread & Jameson, 2010). Within educational research, a longitudinal study by Marcon (2002) demonstrated that, by the end of their sixth year in school, children whose pre-school model had been academically-directed achieved significantly lower marks in comparison to children who had attended child-initiated, play-based pre-school programmes.

6.5 Democratic education for uncertain futures

Across the world, there is recognition that curricula have found it challenging to keep up with societal change. One such development needed with immediacy is to prepare children with the critical digital literacies that will help them to navigate their online lives. Human behaviour, relationships and habits are already

being significantly shaped by the ways we interact with technologies and targeted algorithms. A correlated increase of mental health problems and suicide in young people (Riehm et al., 2019), digital dependency and polarising of political thinking (De-Wit et al., 2019) in recent years demonstrate that the consequences of technological influence are far reaching and require intentional intervention from educators. One recent MIT study found for example that targeted fake news on Twitter spread six times faster than real news (Dizikes, 2018). For our children to be truly autonomous, they need to understand the impact that the new "attention economy" has to manipulate their behaviour and how the affordance that profit incentives in a digital world can give business algorithms to exploit their interests. The introduction of smart phones to children's lives and related rise of social media has been closely linked with a dramatic rise in mental health issues for young people, increasing feelings of loneliness, negatively impacting on well-being, anxiety, depression, poor sleep and low self-esteem (Kelly et al., 2018; Royal Society for Public Health, 2017).

Curriculum cannot also be just about attending to the past or present; it must also hold within it some "best bets" about the knowledge, skills and concepts that will help children to thrive in the future. We need to question to what extent our current curricula attend to "preparing for a world that cannot yet be imagined". What will remain constant is the need to develop human physical and emotional health, resilience and purpose. For democracies to rejuvenate, there will be an ongoing societal need for collaboration between citizens to actively contribute to positively shaping the sustainability of their collective futures.

6.6 Creating new pedagogies for democratic education

To teach the complex needs of a future-oriented curriculum and democratic education, what teachers really need are pedagogical repertoires that they can call on for different educational aims. Amongst this repertoire need to be those that involve children in their education as active agents and that engage children in dialogue. In this practice, knowledge is understood as being something not fixed but rather co-created out of inter-thinking with others. Wegerif (2017) defines such forms of dialogic education in these terms, as going beyond the common conventions of face-to-face talk and questioning, to the lived experience of the "dialogic space" felt between two agents who think together. In this space, positions and arguments move from individuals identifying with different ideas and defending these to a shared line of thought and logic created "in-between"; one that arises beyond what each person could think of independently.

As increasingly polarized political divides have emerged in recent years, spurred on by the interaction of social media and divisive politics, the concept of dialogic space provides a key pedagogical goal to support children to start to learn about how to take better account of other's views. In such true dialogic interactions, chil-

dren engage with others with different perspectives and ways of thinking to their own, learn to accept and incorporate diversity of thought into their understanding of reality and find "logic across difference".

7 Advocating for children in the present and for the future

Dame Alison Peacock is the CEO of the Chartered College of Teaching which is the first professional body for teachers. Unions are not professional bodies but organisations that support workers' rights. The new Chartered College vision is different to the purpose and function of unions:

> We are working to celebrate, support and connect teachers to take pride in their profession and provide the best possible education for children and young people. We are dedicated to bridging the gap between practice and research and equipping teachers from the second they enter the classroom with the knowledge and confidence to make the best decisions for their pupils. (retrieved from website on 15th December 2021 https://chartered.college/aboutus/)

Dame Alison notes the vital importance for democracy in education as enabled to become a reality through raising expectations about what the profession expects of itself. Education cannot be usefully thought of in terms of something "done onto" children. Nor can curricula, pedagogy and assessment approaches be done to educators. Education extends beyond the school gates and truly comes to life when it is realised as a partnership between children, families, schools and communities. It requires of us to rethink accepted practices around structuring in and out of school time, curriculum content, the use of technology, pedagogy, to what extent children's voice is authentically heard and to what extent they feel included. Currently, dialogue about visions for education are typically and often unhelpfully split between those who emphasise methods of "21st century education" such as project-based learning and giving children increased autonomy, and those who affirm forms of core knowledge and foreground cognitive science findings around the inefficiency of certain instructional styles. Dialogic forms of education that attend to the space for children to meaningfully contribute, a curriculum that represents children and their future interests and pedagogies that develop a sense of agency go beyond these approaches to both acknowledge and engage with the complexities of what is needed to include in an education for tomorrow. Ultimately, we need the best of different approaches: in different amounts, at different times, in different ways and for different purposes. Customising our approach and response-ability to children a journey requires everyone in a school community to play an active part. This is perhaps the beginning of a democratic education that is 22nd Century.

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