

SPRING 2023

A word from the Chairman



Greetings and a belated Happy New Year!

We begin 2023 against a backdrop of the threat of industrial action by sectors of the teaching profession. These are linked to funding, pay and conditions of work which have been eroded over many years. It is hoped that there will be efforts by both sides to resolve these

long term issues but at present the outlook is less than hopeful.

This is a great pity as there has been an upsurge of interest in small schools across the country. We have mentioned in previous editions of the Newsletter the 'Small Schools Manifesto'. Our good friend and colleague, Dr. Cath Gristy used this extensively in an international conference in Italy in December. It has also been shared widely across the country with a range of colleagues across the world of education.

Discussions with a number of colleagues from across the country have provided encouraging evidence of the work being undertaken by, with and through small schools. Examples of these can be seen below.

In the last issue we spoke of the difficulty which some small schools were experiencing under the Ofsted framework. NASS was invited to join a taskforce formed by Ofsted to review and advise on how inspector training on the curriculum in small schools could be improved. This meeting took place in November and whilst no conclusions are yet available there were positive indications from the meeting and the evidence provided by NASS members was much appreciated.

As there will be further meetings later this term we would welcome any thoughts by colleagues who have been inspected since October

2022 as this will supplement the evidence sent previously. Please send them to Julie Kelly who will be representing NASS in my absence. Her email is julie_kelly@yahoo.co.uk

May I conclude by wishing you all the best for the coming term. The many challenges ahead and increasingly uncertain political climate show few signs of improvement and we can only hope that wise counsel prevails. Whatever the conclusion, rest assured that we at NASS will be here to support you in whatever ways we can.

Unfortunately for the next few weeks I will not be part of that support team as I was diagnosed with bladder cancer in December. I will be entering hospital very shortly to undergo treatment to rectify this but hope to be back with you early in the summer term.

Neil

How the MAT era is squeezing out small schools

An article with this title appeared in *Schools Week* on January 13. In a wide ranging article with contributions from across a number of individuals and organisations it outlined the difficulties faced by small schools in being considered for membership of a MAT. The 'unattractive' nature of small schools, the 'challenges around mixed (age) classes, recruitment, cost and particularly building costs' were cited as being reasons for trusts being 'really reluctant' to take on small schools. This viability issue was cited by the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee as being a key factor in some 'financially struggling', 'small secular' 'rural primaries' being 'orphaned' and the MATs did not want them. This situation was often made worse through the lack of any local authority support.

The article also noted that 56% of state funded primaries with less than 100 pupils on roll were run by the Church of England often in Diocesan MATs. Within these structures the financial and logistical issues still apply with the need to balance the importance of keeping schools going without there being too much of a drain on the rest of the trust. The impossibility of incorporating church schools into a non-religious MAT was also noted as this would require changes to its designation.

Other factors – the specific challenges faced by small schools during inspections due to individual members of staff being responsible for multiple subjects – recently addressed by the forming of an Ofsted task force to advise on the improvement of inspector training and the need to share resources were also discussed.

The value of developing localised groups within federations was also highlighted as this would be more likely to put 'time and effort into saving those small schools.'

The article began with the following paragraph –

‘Small schools can be the last bastion of a sense of place in communities that have lost their local pub, post office, doctor’s surgery or bus services’.

It seems appropriate therefore to emphasise the need to reinforce the importance of the small school at the centre of the community and not allow structural changes in organisation to erode this further.

Coastal Together

The article also mentioned that ‘some local authorities are ‘clustering small schools together to create a more attractive package for MATs.’ However, that MAT structure need not always be the only solution as Simon Wakeman - Executive Head of Coastal Together explains:



The formation of a six school federation - a viable alternative to joining a multi academy trust

Coastal Together is a six school federation located in both the North Norfolk Coast and the Norfolk Broads. Our primary schools are all village schools ranging from our smallest with just 32 children on roll, to our largest school of 134. The Federation also includes a 16 place KS1 and 2 SEMH Base for children across the County of Norfolk. We also have four preschools.


As the title suggests the term ‘formation’ is probably an incorrect one - perhaps replaced with ‘evolution’, as this tends to be what happens when a school leader is approached, either by the local authority or a governing body in search of a structural solution to an issue, usually around the recruitment of high quality headteacher candidates, of which there is a national shortage. Alternatively, it could be a forward thinking governing body who have experienced the benefits of working more collaboratively, perhaps through partnerships.

So, how did all that happen at Coastal Together? This is a regular question I ask myself but with the inclusion of the phrase 'the hell' inserted between how and did! Back in 2015, Mundesley Infant, Mundesley Junior and Bacton Primary had a recruitment crisis - all three heads decided to retire at the same time (two were married). This led the Chair of Governors at Bacton to suggest the notion of a partnership, leading to a federation, as she felt the likelihood of attracting three potential headteachers to the rural North Norfolk Coast, where half of your recruitment radius is in the sea, would be challenging, at best. The infant and junior school shared the same site and Bacton was only 10 minutes drive away. They managed to attract two candidates, me being one of them. I'd had two previous headships over a 10 year period, the first a village school and the most recent, a city Executive Head role, including a Children's Centre. It seemed like a once in a career opportunity to start something from scratch with no real blueprint - call it a mid-career(life) crisis but there was something about it that really appealed to me. Six years on, three OfSTED inspections and a £1M expansion of the SEMH base takes us up to 2021.

Meanwhile in a different part of the County another recently formed three school federation were looking for a structural solution of their own. Eighteen months previous to that, their EHT suddenly departed from the role and then followed a series of interim heads. Their governing body spent around six months exploring different options; recruitment of a new substantive EHT to lead the three schools, joining a multi-academy trust or joining another group of locally maintained schools. Their preferred option was joining other locally maintained schools. This is where I come in again -not looking for but accepting another midish-career dilemma - do I use my experience of setting up a three school federation and expand it to setting up a six school federation?



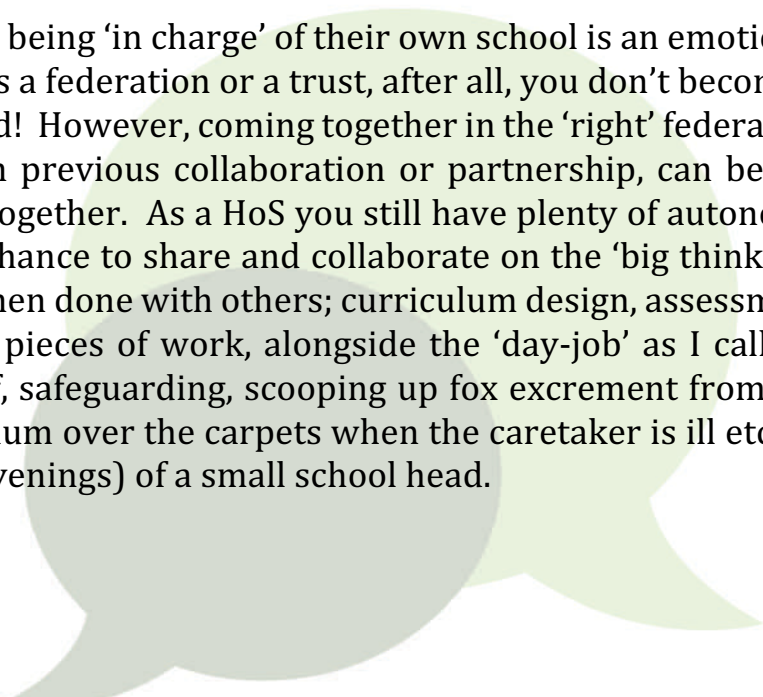
Alongside my leadership of the three coastal schools I was also employed on a consultancy basis by a Norfolk based education service called VNET, as a 'Change Leader'. This involved working with school leadership teams and governing bodies to extol the virtues and advantages of being part of a bigger group of schools, i.e. federations. So, with all of this in my mind on April 1st 2021 a two federation partnership was formed, leading to me being appointed on Sept 1st 2021 as EHT at the now rebadged 'Coastal Together'. During the term of partnership a lot of strategic thinking (and doing) was done - systems that work well for three schools were enhanced for six, new roles developed and the governing body reorganised to give clear oversight of the six schools. Whilst this was challenging 'change management' work, it enabled the expanded federation to get off to a rapid start.



Part of the internal reorganisation was to create some mini executive roles with the leadership of the schools, so my deputy is also Head of School, across two schools and the Head of School of the infant school is now leading the juniors and the SEMH Base as well. The HoS of the juniors is now Head of Teaching, Learning, Standards and CPD - a headship level role but with no attached school. This person adds capacity to all of the HoS roles and focuses on curriculum development - something that is so important, yet sometimes falls off the bottom of a HoS's lists, whilst dealing with all of the day to day management issues a school presents. We have created a Central Services team, made up of our Business Director, Business Manager, myself and my PA- who also manages all HR issues. Our Business Director has a focussed remit of finance, funding streams and leading the central team, whilst my Business Manager is in charge of estate management. Although we only have the same number of children as a large primary (approx 600 children) having six sites presents daily tasks for our site team! We also have other roles, created to make things work and to share the expertise around the federation - for example, we have a Lead DSL who supports and enhances the DSLs in each school, producing monthly newsletters, training and supervision. We have a Safeguarding Practitioner who is also the PA to the HoS of the infant and junior - this enables fairly seamless communication of day to day safeguarding within the two schools, which frees-up the HoS to focus on school improvement.

Many of you reading this - if you've persevered this far, will probably be thinking that this structural solution sounds rather like a Multi Academy Trust - and you'd be right but the real difference for our group of small schools is that whilst they benefit from being part of a bigger group, with shared expertise and opportunities to learn from each other, they all retain their unique qualities - each school remains at the heart of it's community. The MAT model in my view, is a sound model, regardless of anyone's political views but it doesn't suit all circumstances - particularly when the scale and finances don't enable a big central team and the regulations don't allow for such small MATs anymore. But you can scale that down and make it work with the right structure.

For many Heads and Governors, not being 'in charge' of their own school is an emotional block to formally coming together as a federation or a trust, after all, you don't become a headteacher if you don't want to lead! However, coming together in the 'right' federation where trust has been built through previous collaboration or partnership, can be the stepping stone to formally coming together. As a HoS you still have plenty of autonomy on the day to day stuff and then a chance to share and collaborate on the 'big thinking', which is always more productive when done with others; curriculum design, assessment and learning progression are huge pieces of work, alongside the 'day-job' as I call it - dealing with children, parents, staff, safeguarding, scooping up fox excrement from the playground and 'whipping' the vacuum over the carpets when the caretaker is ill etc etc etc, pretty much fills the day (and evenings) of a small school head.





In 2018 NASS produced a piece of research entitled 'Collaboration not Collision' which reviewed the different ways individual and groups of small schools were working together to provide an enhanced quality of education. Our view is still the same and the work undertaken in Norfolk demonstrates that there are other routes which can be taken provided there is a willingness to do so, the imagination to see how these can be developed and a drive by all concerned to succeed.

Great news from Essex

We are always delighted to hear the different ways in which small schools are being supported. This next article comes from Essex and tells of how headteachers there have developed an organisation which enables them to work together more effectively.



Essex Small Schools Support Group

Essex is one of the largest local authorities in England, with around 460 primary-phase schools. They are supported by EPHA, the Essex Primary Headteachers' Association, and we have a totally inclusive approach; all of our schools, maintained or academy, are automatically members of EPHA. In addition, we extend membership to primary-phase special schools and a number of independent schools as well.

There are around 60 schools in Essex with fewer than 120 pupils on roll; the smallest currently has just 44 children. As readers of this article know only too well, running a small school comes with its own unique challenges, the size of the budget being just one. Other problems include the limited number of staff, including the size of the leadership team, the fact that a small-school head often has a timetabled teaching commitment, lacks administrative and support staff, and often has no caretaker – all of these pressures have to be managed and it is nearly always the headteacher who fills the gaps.

In addition there are logistical challenges, including how to deliver and lead the curriculum, educational visits and trips and so on. Parents of children with special educational needs often feel that a small school will offer a nurturing and secure space for their child – and they often do – but this adds hugely to the pressure on an already limited budget. Many of these schools are rural and the difficulty of accessing support from other services adds to their workload.

Finding and recruiting good governors is a challenge for all schools, but may be even harder in a small school in a rural location, with a limited local population.

EPHA recognises all of these issues and more, so a year ago we decided to set up a Small Schools Support Group, to support small-school headteachers and to offer a regular forum for discussion, as well as a chance to share ideas and expertise. The group offers our small-school headteachers:

- Support and reassurance
- Advice and guidance
- Shared experience and expertise
- Opportunities
- Developing and promoting the understanding of the unique challenges of the role
- A voice, locally and nationally

We hold meetings every half term, online, as we recognise how difficult it can be for headteachers to get out of school. The group is chaired by Jinnie Nichols, who is the Executive Headteacher of a federation of three schools in Essex, supported by me, the EPHA Professional Officer. The meeting agendas have included a range of discussion topics such as managing Ofsted, funding, wellbeing and support for headteacher wellbeing and capacity. We also try to offer practical help and solutions, so, for example, have paid for group membership to FundEd, a company that provides excellent information about grants and fund raising. <http://funded.org.uk/>

We are also able to broker capacity support in a small school, freeing up senior leadership time to enable headteachers to undertake the statutory duties they all have to complete, whatever the size of school.

Once a year we hold an in-person conference and ensure that the programme is useful, relevant and fun, so that heads get value from the day. In October we took the opportunity to celebrate the unique joy of small schools, which was an important aim of the conference.

<https://essexprimaryheads.co.uk/files/small-schools-celebration-booklet.pdf>

Over our first year we have benefited from the input from a number of external colleagues, including the Local Authority, the national small-school headteacher roundtable, Ofsted, the Diocese, National Leaders of Governance, as well as coaches and counsellors. Neil Short, the Chair of NASS, was a welcome addition to our January meeting and we look forward to benefiting from the Association's expertise and national contact with small school colleagues across the country. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you want any more information about the group or think that you could offer our headteachers any support and expertise.

Pam Langmead

EPHA Professional Officer

pam@langmead.me.uk

www.essexprimaryheads.co.uk

Plum crumble and pink custard

We are always delighted to hear from governors of our small schools. Their work is a vital part of ensuring that the school remains a vibrant part of the local community. Recently, Rebecca Blackwood, Chair of Governors at Tealby Primary School in Lincolnshire wrote to us and asked for information about NASS. Two telephone conversations later and she had agreed to work with us as governor representative on the Board of Trustees and provide the following article under the above heading.

I have fond memories of the small school in Kent that I attended as a five-year-old. Waiting expectantly in Thursday's straggling lunch queue for warm plum crumble and a dollop of nuclear-pink custard. Wobbling precariously across the grassy field on wooden stilts. Alexis in Year 2, who perched on the log by the wildlife area at breaktimes fulfilling the youngest children's requests for their names to be penned in exquisite swirly writing.



Three decades and a couple of children later, I found myself moving to Lincolnshire with my family. Despite having grown up in the countryside, 15 years spent working under a blanket of smog in London's vibrant East End made landing in the village of Tealby a bit of a shock to the system. Even with a background in education, school governance was not something I'd given much thought until I was ribbed into it by a well-meaning friend who, it seems, caught me in a rare 'what's the harm in saying yes' moment... And so it was that after living in the village for a couple of years, I became a governor, and more recently chair, at our local primary school. I can safely say that the last few years have been some of the most rewarding of my life.

Our school occupies a beautiful Grade II listed building on the edge of the Lincolnshire Wolds. Of course, like many old buildings, it does present certain challenges. The hammer beam roof in the oldest part of the school is modelled on Westminster Hall. It is quite spectacular. The newer part of the building – well, that was designed with all the ergonomic quirks of late twentieth century architecture.

It won't come as a surprise to you to know that lurking behind the historic ironstone facade is a closely knit community. Our school, like many small schools, is a family – a family that cares, supports and nurtures. We aspire to be an example of the best kind of primary school – one that creates great people. And we know that this can only happen when the community comes together and works as a whole.

Most of our governors are drawn either from the parent body or from the village itself. Despite the often familiar faces and friendly smiles, I always make time to meet with new governors when they come on board, usually over a brew on a picnic bench in the village park. We chat about who they are and what contribution they want to make to governance. Who is this person and what makes them tick? What *really* drives their interest in governance? This isn't just a one off – the conversations become a regular occurrence – we tend to meet up a couple of times each half term. It's a huge investment of time, but it pays dividends. Even after a short period of time, it is already clear that this has had a big impact on the effectiveness of our induction and the quality of individual governor's contributions to meetings. Now we are actively working to encourage every governor, new and old, to buddy up with another – someone who has a different level of experience, or different area of expertise, so that those connections can continue to build. Good governance does not happen by accident. It is intentional.

The conversations I've had have given me many insights and helped shape my priorities as chair. I have learnt, for example, how the intimacy and friendliness of a small setting, whilst often framed in a positive light, can present real challenges for governors. Sometimes, being part of a close-knit community means that governors can be reluctant to rock the boat, for fear of damaging relationships or causing conflict. Sometimes, governors worry about being seen as difficult or uncooperative. Add this to the dynamics of the boardroom table and it can lead to a distinct lack of alternative perspectives in decision-making. As chair, it is crucial that I am aware of the real views of the team, and

support everyone to speak up and share their own ideas, even if they differ from those of the group. Actively flipping the coin and ensuring we consider what's on the other side is the only way to be certain that the right decisions are made.

In a small setting, the impact of every decision the board makes - and the way board members conduct themselves - is palpable. My biggest responsibility is to ensure that the team we have works as efficiently and effectively as possible. A governing board should never put undue stress on leaders and staff. School leadership is intense. Resources in a small setting are limited. Delegation is often impossible. Governance, therefore, must be lean, but effective. This means, of course, that our systems and processes must operate smoothly and efficiently.



We've changed a lot of our monitoring structures over the last 18 months to ensure that they give us the quality of information we need - but it is not enough to stop there and assume the job is done. If the role of governors is to encourage leaders to think more, and think differently, then governors must commit to constantly revising and refining their own systems and practices. We need to regularly switch on the torch and shine a light on ourselves as a board, actively seeking out areas for growth and improvement. Perhaps I'm just getting old, but my best ideas come when I slow down, so the board has a work plan for the year which includes regular opportunities for review and reflection, both as individuals and as a team. We have recently started to develop links with a couple of other local boards so that we can work as a triad, supporting and challenging each other

to grow. By being purposeful in creating spaces to stop and think, more can be achieved for the children.

When you mix the pressure of having lots of new governors on board with the quirks of being a small school, and the tremendous sense of responsibility to get it right for the children, it feels sometimes like there is a mountain to climb. And it's a pretty foggy one at that. But I am fuelled by a desire to see individuals and the wider organisation develop and thrive, and one thing for me is clear: if we really want our communities to come together and work as a whole, then even in a small setting that starts with being deliberate in getting to know the individual parts and making sure they understand each other.

We are always delighted to hear from Governors about their work in school and hope that there will be more contributions sent to us for future issues.

Under pressure: the financial squeeze on small schools in England

NASS has enjoyed a close relationship with NAHT, largely due to Julie Kelly, one of our Trustees who is also a member of the Union Executive. They have undertaken two reports involving small schools which highlighted their support. In May 2022 they surveyed their members to ascertain the impact of funding levels. A report based on the findings was published in January and we have been allowed to provide the headline details.

The following quote features prominently in the report and highlights the major threads throughout.

'While inadequate funding is clearly not the only current challenge facing small schools, for a large number it remains a primary concern'

The report, based upon a survey of 360 NAHT members was a repeat of a similar exercise undertaken three years ago. The results revealed a worsening picture covering all aspects of school life.

- Close to half of respondents in small schools are concerned about the possibility of closure of their school.
 - *47% of respondents were concerned about the possibility of closure*
 - *This was due to a lack of funding*
 - *Or low or fluctuating numbers*

- Small schools in England are experiencing a worsening financial position
 - *68% of respondents indicated that the financial position had 'worsened or significantly worsened' over the last three years*
- A perfect storm of financial pressures
 - *Providing increased support for pupils with SEND*
 - *Increased utility bill costs, including energy and broadband*
 - *Increased salary costs or pressures*
- Funding is inadequate to meet the needs of pupils
 - *This included increased sparsity funding*
 - *Despite this increase not all schools were eligible and thus received no additional funding*
- Respondents highlighted a range of actions they have already taken, or are planning to take, to manage the financial pressures their schools are facing
 - *67% of respondents had increased their own teaching commitment*
 - *56% had reduced the number of hours of teaching assistants*
 - *37% had reduced non-educational support and services for children*
 - *Further similar actions were anticipated over the next three year*
 - *'The potential impact of these cuts on the most vulnerable pupils or those with additional needs, is of particular concern'*
- Small schools are forced to explore alternative forms of income to balance the books
 - *64% of respondents have had to opportunities to increase income*
 - *48% anticipate having to do so over the next three years*
 - *These include heads and senior leaders taking on consultancy work across the education sector*
- A crumbling small school estate
 - *Many small schools are older buildings*
 - *41% of respondents were concerned that the upkeep of the school buildings could contribute towards decisions on closure*
 - *53% had reduced their maintenance budget over the past three year and 37% anticipated having to do so in the future.*

The report makes a clear and well documented argument for increased funding which, despite government claims, aligns with evidence from NASS members gleaned from meetings over the past three years. The industrial action currently being taken is not purely about pay but seeks to highlight the failing documented within the report.

Two quotes from the NAHT Report crystallise the importance of the small school. This is the first paragraph:

Small schools play a vital and irreplaceable role in our education system. With the decline of many local services, these schools have increasingly become the focal point of the communities they serve.

And in its 2021 funding consultation, the Department for Education (DfE) acknowledged:

"One group of schools that evidence suggests are facing particular financial challenges are small, remote schools. We recognise the vital role that such schools play in the rural communities they serve and that without them pupils could face long travel distances to travel."

NASS acknowledge the work undertaken by NAHT and thank them for providing more evidence both of the importance of the small school and the urgent need for adequate funding.

Reflections on retiring after 21 years as headteacher of a small school

The next two articles were sent to NASS by Alison Saunders, the head at St. Lawrence in Kent. Alison has been a great supporter of NASS over the years and will be retiring in April 2023. We invited her to reflect on her career as a small school head teacher.

I became headteacher at St Lawrence Primary School in September 2002 and I have always felt that the school chose me rather than me choosing the school, much like the Hogwarts sorting hat. At the time I was very happy as deputy head at a local school and had no intention of becoming a head but in April 2002 I visited St Lawrence to borrow a numeracy training video, this being before the days of DVDs and You Tube links. To my surprise, I left this feisty little school with an application form for the headship, and it was the start of an amazing journey with some incredible people.

That was twenty-one years ago and now I am travelling happily through my sixties. I love my job but I am aware that life is short and I have come to the decision that I am ready to start retirement – the next adventure of life, and so I will be handing over the baton at Easter.

Reflecting on the last two decades, I feel an overwhelming sense of privilege to have steered the ship through both calm and turbulent waters. We fought plans to close us



(that was tough) but the community spirit has been strong. My overriding memories are of the children achieving beyond their expectations, whether it's singing a solo in church or going down a zip-wire on a residential trip.

Yes, I have had a ball and I am pleased that I resisted the temptation to move to a larger school.

What have I learned? That would take a book! Every day there is something to learn, or question, or

review. That's all part of the fun. But a few things stand out.....

1. Ofsted is not always right. Over the past 21 years I have seen 'Ofsted Fads' come and go. At the time they are presented to us as ultimate truths but five years later they are unimportant, or even wrong. I learned to question whether or not something was having a positive influence on the children's wellbeing and/or learning? And if not...to ask why are we spending time on it?
2. Do not worry about being outstanding, it takes too much effort and time. If you have a good school every day, that is far superior to being outstanding for one/two days when Ofsted Inspectors visit.
3. Stay humble - Sometimes I needed to remind myself of the teachers that educated the children in my school a hundred years ago without internet, central heating, mobile phones and a National Curriculum. They did a great job! I am a custodian, not owner of my school, and who knows where it will go in the future.
4. When something goes wrong say 'sorry, it was my fault', even when it isn't...it shuts people up! And it can be an interesting social experiment!

My governors, probably wisely, have relied on more than the magic of a sorting hat to find a new headteacher and I'm looking forward to seeing where the future takes this unique little school!

Alison Saunders

Headteacher of St Lawrence Primary School <http://www.st-lawrence-sevenoaks.kent.sch.uk/>

And she also told us about an unexpected but magical Christmas experience for the children at her school.

Snow nativity at St. Lawrence

If your age is in single figures, Christmas is a very special occasion. As an adult is also lovely, but it's not quite the same as those childhood celebrations. In our small schools we are all passionate about creating memories that will last a life time; a sense of simplicity and wonder. We are all acutely aware that over the past couple of years Covid has made this a big challenge.



*This year, at St Lawrence, we were all set for a Christmas free of Covid restrictions but we had a new challenge - the snow came and threatened to hamper our festivities. We had planned to have a 'Live Nativity' in our field; real sheep, a donkey and camels (alpacas) but transporting animals down snowy lanes is not possible (and apparently the alpacas had anxiety separation disorder!). However, small schools are masters at turning a challenge into an opportunity and so we used the snow, a resource that we had lots of, and created a life size **Snow Nativity!** It took three hours to make and the children showed amazing perseverance and seemed oblivious to the sub-zero temperatures. We added festive lighting and the result was really magical. A memory created!*

Faith, Hope and Love: A journey into Church School Leadership

Like the former teachers we are NASS Trustees are interested in the thoughts of small school colleagues published and shared across a range of sources. And this has proved of great value. Some time ago we reprinted a blog by Jo Luxford from Dartmoor a 'cheerful Principal of three tiny schools' and 'small school champion' where she likened the role of headship to participation in a triathlon. Her latest, more personal blog explores the way small school headship has revitalised her Christian faith.

I grew up in a non-conformist Christian household and was actually quite devout until my middle teens when I lost my faith and never really found it again. A brush with a slightly odd evangelical Christian group in my adolescent years followed by a miserable teaching practise at a Catholic primary school convinced me that religion was not something I wanted anything to do with as an adult or that had any place in our education system. I actively rejected any opportunities to teach in church schools, refused to consider a church school for my own children and vocally declared that I'd never work in one.

When I was asked by my Trust leader to step up at short notice and take over as Principal of two tiny rural schools in the heart of Devon I knew that I was as ready as I was ever going to be for the leap from class teaching into school leadership. Yes, the fact that one of the schools was a church school did come into the conversation, but I wanted to be a head teacher and I was excited by the things that were going on in my Trust. I really wanted to stay, rather than looking at jobs elsewhere so I took a leap (of faith!); and here I am, now Principal of not two but three tiny schools and, to my surprise, richer at a deep level for the fact that one of them is a Church of England school.

The prospect of SIAMS inspections and the paperwork relating to this was (and is) daunting. To begin with I worried about the extra rules - and rankled against the idea of a non-educational organisation dictating anything at all about school life - but I doubled down. I read the paperwork. I did a couple of training courses. I met with the vicar. I put some bible verses on my newsletters and checked that every classroom had an RE display. I even went to church a couple of times. I felt as though I was starting to understand how to play this church school game.

Then, under the guidance of the amazing @gez_r, my Trust CofE schools group started looking at, talking about and reading about spirituality. We had some really fabulous discussions which started to change my thinking. The Diocesan Education Officer came to visit and challenged me to define what I meant by 'spirituality' and suddenly it stopped being about box-ticking and started being about something much bigger and more beautiful. We all know school is about much more than can be put on a knowledge organiser. Yes, knowledge is power and I won't be persuaded otherwise, but there's more; what about the rest?

I am starting to understand that Christian Distinctiveness is more about the fact that these schools are distinctive because they try to be more open to spirituality in all its forms – Christian or otherwise. They place a focus on aspects of ‘relational consciousness’ that might not feature in the life of a non-church school. We’re in an era when the educational lexicon is filled with utilitarian language (which incidentally, I love). Phrases like ‘evidence informed’, ‘research based’, ‘cost-benefit analysis’, ‘quality assurance’ are part of everyday parlance. It has turned out to be unexpectedly lovely though, to enter a world where the language spoken includes words such as joy, spirituality, and flourishing and where these concepts are informing decision making by school leaders.

There’s something about lighting a candle and spending a moment or two in collective silence. There’s something about prayer – admitting out loud that you don’t have all the answers but that’s OK. There’s something about a habit of thankfulness, of wonder, of humility that I think can enrich school life in a way that is surprising and yet not at all surprising. If I’m honest, I am still unsure about the concept of a ‘Church School’ but I am now happily convinced that there is a role for spirituality, for flourishing, for joy in our education system and it is something I will always hold in my heart as a school leader.

I often feel as if I don’t have much to offer when it comes to school leadership. Imposter syndrome is real! However, I do have plenty of faith – that schools are powerful and important places; hope – that the future can be better; and, of course, love – without which we are nothing.

Looking after yourself ...and others

The subject of mental health and well-being continues to dominate many conversations. We have heard from colleagues of techniques which they are using in school for pupils and teachers alike.

We were recently sent the following link which had formed part of a programme which one school adopted to meet their needs and had found it informative and useful

<https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/5-steps-to-mental-health-and-wellbeing/>

Perhaps you may wish to visit this site and see for yourself.

Open letter to HMCI Amanda Spielman regarding the Early Years Curriculum Review

The Early Years classes of small school have always been an important factor of their overall success setting the foundations for the future. We at NASS are fortunate in having Kathryn Solly, an Early Years champion on our Board of Trustees. She was one of nearly one hundred EYFS specialists who contributed and supported this document.

We the undersigned are writing to you about the recently published Ofsted document [Best start in life part 1: setting the scene](#).

While we welcome Ofsted's recognition of the vital role of the early years, we are concerned that as a scene-setting document for this strand of research, the review has a number of concerning deficiencies and does not position Ofsted as an expert voice on early years pedagogy and curriculum.

The report reads as if it relied solely on a small and incomplete review of the literature, not the rich and extensive peer-reviewed research evidence available. It also fails to reflect the wealth of excellent practice in the sector which inspectors must be regularly encountering.

As individuals and organisations we would welcome the opportunity to work with you to ensure that the reviews of the Areas of Learning are a better reflection of the extensive research on early years pedagogy and curriculum which provide a sound basis for Ofsted's judgements on quality, supporting both inspectors and practitioners.

Given the potential influence of the review, we urge you to review the current document and ensure future parts of the review are better balanced and grounded in the evidence. While the report states that "the principles do not specify what must be taught or how", the implicit threat of being downgraded for not complying with what is set out in the report will inevitably influence what and how settings and schools teach. It would be worrying if the principles in the report were to be applied by either practitioners or inspectors in a narrow or simplistic way. We set out below concerns about some of the specifics of the report.

- 1. Coverage of all EYFS provision** Your decision to state that this document is focused on birth to 4, and to include the reception year in its school research review is concerning as the EYFS principles cover the full birth to 5 age range, including the Reception year (and any children in year 1 who need ongoing EYFS provision to reach the Early Learning Goals). This perhaps reflects the split

between Ofsted's schools and EY framework, which is itself problematic in potentially applying different criteria to children who should be experiencing the same quality of provision. This was a missed opportunity for Ofsted to state a unifying approach to early years across all types of provision, for all children in the early years foundation stage.

- 2. Underpinning principles** The principles underpinning the review need to reflect the underpinning principles of the EYFS itself: the Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments and Learning & Development. The review does not sufficiently reflect the vision of every child as a unique child who is constantly learning and who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured. Instead, the continued problematic use of the term [cultural capital](#) perpetuates a deficit model.
- 3. Limited engagement with research evidence** While the report sets out the filters used for selecting research reviewed, these do not seem to explain the selection of research references included. It is not enough to assert that "This is not a systematic literature review. When selecting literature, we draw on research that aligns with the criteria for high-quality education, published in our education inspection framework (EIF) and summarised in our 'Education inspection framework: overview of research'". For instance, although the context section references the importance of staff-child relationships, this does not appear to be referenced in the principles section and there is no reference to the significant research on the role of the adult for example on Sustained Shared Thinking ([Suraj et al](#)), Professional Love ([Page](#)), the role of the key person ([Elfer et al](#)) or the adult-child interactions ([Fisher](#)). These are significant omissions for any research review which claims to set out principles for high quality pedagogy, although by no means a comprehensive list of the omissions.
- 4. Definition of curriculum** The problematic nature of the Ofsted definition of curriculum has been much written about. Even if we accept that Ofsted is intentionally choosing a narrow definition of curriculum rather than the all-embracing one, it is still unsatisfactory. Trying to stretch a single definition across all phases of education simply puts it under too much strain, and when applied to children under 5 – especially babies and toddlers – it is not up to the task. The review includes statements that: "What matters is that leaders and practitioners have considered what knowledge they want children to learn and the order in which to teach it, as well as which methods are most effective for teaching." and "Progress in curricular terms means knowing more and remembering more". Neither of these definitions is a good fit for the early years. There is a good reason why the EYFS uses the concepts of development and learning, which are not simply about remembering or knowing what – or even knowing how. Children in the early years are also developing their capabilities

as is recognised in the cognitive science research Ofsted [quotes](#) in the review. The non-linear nature of learning and development in the early years is also at odds with the Ofsted focus on progression. It does not mean that there is no sequence at all, but it does mean that Ofsted's language needs to recognise the fluid and flexible processes of learning and development and how practitioners develop curricula accordingly.

5. **Definition of teaching** We are concerned by the removal of the first sentence of Ofsted's long-established and well-constructed definition of teaching in the early years in the review and in the latest version of the inspection handbook: "Teaching in the early years should not be taken to imply a "top down" or formal way of working." This is an important and appropriate strategy in certain contexts in the early years. It might be helpful for the section on early years teaching to address pedagogical issues in more depth.
6. **How children learn and cognitive science** It is a major omission that in the section on "How children learn and cognitive science" and the section on Executive Function, the review makes no mention of the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning, which are core to the EYFS Statutory Framework and underpin practitioners' understanding of early years pedagogy. Instead, it references only breakthroughs in cognitive science. While cognitive science often confirms and potentially adds to what we know to be good pedagogical practice in the early years, it is only one of many fields which supports our understanding of teaching and learning in the early years. Moreover, cognitive science research is sometimes misapplied: cognitive scientists have [advised caution](#) that the research results are often from lab conditions not real life, and cannot be assumed to apply to other contexts – for instance to a younger age range than those in the original research. While the importance of Executive Function is recognised in the early years, by failing to connect this section with the Characteristics of Learning or the concept of Self-Regulation as recently added to the EYFS Statutory Framework, the review risks adding further confusion to a complex concept. It also needs to take care that the concepts and research it cites are relevant to this age group: a [study conducted with undergraduates](#) does not provide evidence for how children aged 4 and under learn.
7. **Following children's interests** The review's suggestion that practitioners would limit children to their existing interests and not give opportunities to develop new ones is bizarre. Such a misinterpretation of what it means to "follow children's interests" casts into question whether the authors have real-life experience of the early years sector. Does Ofsted really encounter settings which are restricting children only to those areas of interests that they initially exhibit? The concept of using children's interests is about gaining engagement

to widen and deepen children's knowledge. The interconnectedness of learning in the early years means that almost anything can be a starting point for all the areas of learning, and the characteristics of effective learning too. Engaging one child's interest as a starting point is also an opportunity to spread that enthusiasm to other children whose own interests are different. If this is an attempt to encourage widening the breadth of children's experiences, it is not well-directed, important as that point may be.

8. Play While we welcome the review's recognition of the importance of play, this section is also a poor reflection of the complex and nuanced literature on the topic. It fails to recognise the importance of play in its own right, as well as its role in children's learning and development.

9. Reflecting the realities of early years practice It is unfortunate that the review's examples of practice are not well chosen or explained. Take: "For example, learning about kings, castles and knights from traditional story books, together with language such as 'a long time ago', helps children to develop foundational knowledge for learning history later on." This is a very simplistic and inadequate reference to the complex process by which children might come to develop an understanding of history. Amongst other things, this requires the concept of time which as we know develops from the very immediate and experiential (how many sleeps), through understanding time through the experience of family members (parents, grandparents) and their surroundings and community – and yes, also through books and stories. Such a brief and inadequate example is not helpful. The examples about teaching children to throw and catch, or theming activities around the "Bear Hunt" have been similarly [critiqued](#) on social media.

On the basis of this review, before Ofsted publishes its reviews of the seven areas of learning, we urge you to trial them with knowledgeable and experienced practitioners and researchers and engage with sector representative bodies. We would be delighted to help ensure that future documents make a more effective contribution to the debate about quality than the current review manages to do. Many of us were involved with the production of the ['Getting it right in the early years foundation stage: a review of the evidence'](#) (which we are pleased to see you reference) and [Birth to 5 Matters](#), which has been enthusiastically adopted across the early years sector because of the principled and evidence-based nature of its content. We hope you will take us up on this offer to ensure that Ofsted's future curriculum review documents received an equally warm welcome from the sector.

Kathryn will be contributing an article outlining her thoughts about the future of EYFS in the next NASS Newsletter. If colleagues have any thoughts about EYFS provision in their school, then please contact NASS.

Professor John West-Burnham



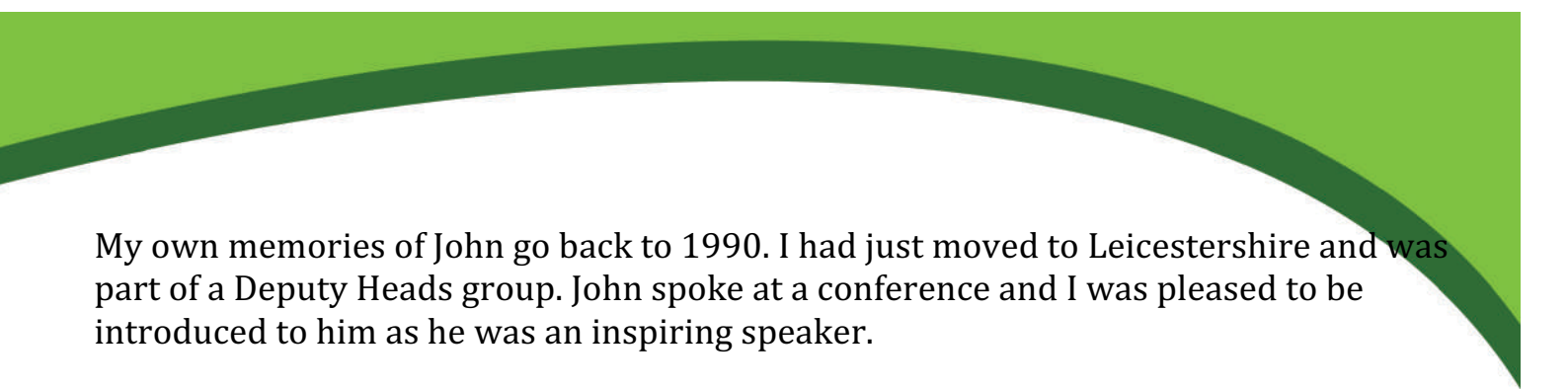
The world of education was saddened to hear of the death of John in early December last year. There were many tributes from colleagues across the country and his passing had a special significance for two of us who were proud to call him our friend.

Here Kathryn Solly recounts her memories:

I first met John in 2003 when I applied and won a Unilever Fellowship. He was part of the interview panel alongside Dame Pat Collarbone and others. I challenged them because I became the first maintained nursery school headteacher to win the award. My research into early childhood leadership has remained a passion ever since. John was a great mentor and guide who challenged thinking, encouraged reflection and helped me to look at the many aspects of the leadership of small schools in particular. He was always focused on the future and improvement via transformation and saw early childhood as a cornerstone in getting education right for children.

Later he invited me to go with a British Council study tour and conference to New Zealand in 2015 to look at educational leadership in the community. We had two weeks of study, conference and meetings at the University of Waikato Institute of Leadership alongside many visits to schools and settings. We contributed to the conference alongside representatives from New Zealand, South Africa and Britain.

John was often a quiet man who listened carefully. His sense of humour was like a tsunami and he stood up for the values and importance of early childhood. It was a privilege to learn and work with him. I will miss him. RIP John.



My own memories of John go back to 1990. I had just moved to Leicestershire and was part of a Deputy Heads group. John spoke at a conference and I was pleased to be introduced to him as he was an inspiring speaker.

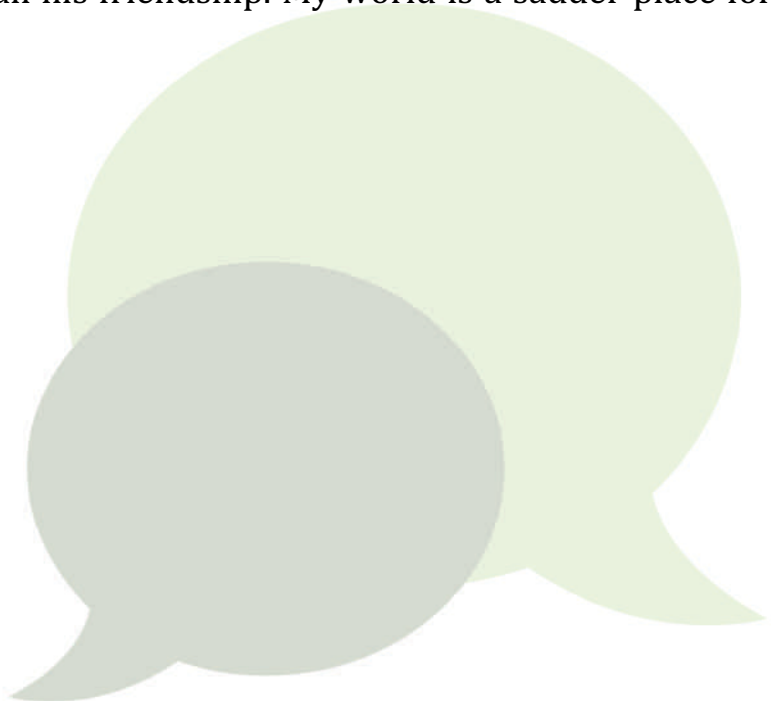
Two years later he was employed at Leicester University and he spoke at many events in the county both large and small. He developed and encouraged a small group of heads and deputies to spend a day with him discussing current issues within education. A loose format would involve him opening the day with his thoughts and then broadening the discussion to the whole group. I have to say they were some of the best CPD events I have ever attended as he encouraged us to think, reflect and articulate our thoughts. He saw the development of such networks as being a key element in professional development.

When the National College for School Leadership opened he was invited to submit an essay for their Leadership library. Entitled 'Learning to Lead' this became a key document for me in my later work and I have quoted him to other colleagues more time than I can possibly count.

When I left headship and became an Education Consultant, he led my first training day. After this he encouraged me to develop my interest and passion for small schools and was a support before and after my Winston Churchill Fellowship to New Zealand in 2008.

Our paths continued to cross and I always knew he was available for advice, and guidance. This was particularly valuable when was able to support NASS in their application for research funding through the Laurel Trust. Through his guidance our 'Collaboration not Collision' project was able to take place in 2018.

Many people speak of having a 'guru'. I can say that John was the nearest person I would admit to having as this sort of figure. I valued his wisdom, his academic background and knowledge, his advice but most of all his friendship. My world is a sadder place for his passing.



Stop press:

On Monday/Tuesday February 6/7 we held Zoom meetings for colleagues across the country. A wide range of subjects were discussed including Ofsted, Governance, Mental Health and Well-being. Experiences, expertise and individual contexts were shared and a network of like-minded colleagues developed

We intend to hold two similar events before Easter so please keep an eye out for the emails giving details of dates/times etc.

See you there!

If you know of any colleagues who are not members get them to Join NASS today and help to support our work!

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