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A Modern Tale from the Forest of Sherwood from Luby, A. and Beckley, P. 2017

As a researcher, how do you measure success in education? What about this? Location: former mining village in darkest, deepest Nottinghamshire Conversation –

Grant: How many is that then?

Lee: I make it four.

Grant: So, that's four syringes on the football field. What about the dog poo?

Lee: Let's not go there...!

This extract summarises the conversation between head teacher, Grant Worthington, and CEO of The Forge Trust, Lee Hessey. As autumn leaves fall, they survey the football field of a primary school that no-one wants - except them. Others see failure and waste; they see opportunity and challenge. For Grant, it is an opportunity to revive the fortunes of the children in the mining village in which he grew up. An opportunity not to be missed. For Lee, it is a challenge to build further the four schools' multi-academy trust that is The Forge Trust. A challenge not to be resisted.

How do you measure hope? ambition? dreams? It is the ambition of people like Lee and Grant that first drew me to The Forge Trust. Their hopes and dreams are for the young folk whom they serve: children who are but modern reflections of themselves from a time past. Grant and Lee have forged successful careers and happy lives; and they wish the same for the offspring of the proud mining towns of Ollerton and Newark. They are not alone.

Three years ago, under the tutelage of Wendy Morton, an experienced educationist, the AdAstra Primary Partnership came into being. I was gifted an opportunity to work with teachers from this partnership sited in schools that '...are located in or near to areas of deprivation. The six schools are rigorously addressing the issue of poverty and asked for an outside research consultancy project to help take them forward with their plans' (Luby 2016b: Researching Education Bulletin 9 2).

The AdAstra research projects are both varied and compelling. In the playground and in the streets, award winning head teacher, Helen Chambers, has engaged with and won over recalcitrant parents, who now cooperate gladly with staff and even study at her primary school. But within the early years' classroom a confusing problem presents itself; that of children unable to grasp properly any implement for writing. Along with her staff, Helen has the vision and the humility to seek outside help: this was provided by specialist Paul Young. According to the teachers, the impact of his in-service has been both "informative" and "amazing". Indeed, some staff have become enthused and spontaneously talk about some of the techniques displayed. Such a positive impact is very important as the type of professional development for teachers regarding handwriting development '...can have significant impacts on children's writing that can endure for at least two years' (Jones & Christensen 2012: 223).

Members of staff cite evidence of this impact through becoming more aware of the links between physical development and handwriting skills; and, in particular, they identify: - Visual clues for lack of gross motor and fine motor skills; - Tripod grip as an example of fine motor skills but whole hand grip is gross motor and use of the latter indicates a lack of the former; - Importance of crawling for

proper development of balance; and - Physical skill as a requirement for literacy. Such professional development of understanding amongst teaching staff and teaching assistants is commendable; and of particular significance given that 'Most studies of children's handwriting acquisition focused on the elementary school years, and there is scarce information about the development of writing skills before that time' (Vilageliu et al 2012: 7).

This combination of vision and humility, seeking fresh understanding and, ultimately, transformation – is evident across all of the AdAstra partnership schools (Luby 2016a, 2017) e.g.

- Jacksdale Primary and Nursery School secures outside expertise but, using primarily the staff's own expertise, addresses poverty of language;
- The Sir Donald Bailey Academy has a whole-staff approach to the development of speaking & listening skills; and
- Forest View Junior School imaginatively develops critical thinking.

Unsurprisingly, the AdAstra partnership is no longer six schools – but has doubled in size. Primaries from as far afield as the cathedral city of Peterborough, the East Midlands 'capital' of Nottingham, and the disused coalfields of South Yorkshire are now in the fold. This excitement at the positive outcomes being achieved by teachers tackling poverty spreads also to higher education. Several colleagues, intrigued by the talk about AdAstra, ventured into classrooms to conduct ethnographic research.

The two extracts below from the jottings of Pat Beckley give a flavour of their experiences.

[A]. The entrance hall welcomes children, staff, parents and visitors into the school. A teacher explains she has introduced 'Visualisation Learning' as previous assessments of children's progress show a lack of understanding of spelling, particularly impacting on boys writing abilities; and it was a 'fun way to learn'. Staff discussions lead to initiatives including whole school collaboration for improvement in spelling, the promotion of children's language, parental involvement, a safe and secure school environment with stimulating, engaging and motivating activities.

[B]. The home/school aspect is carefully considered regarding liaison with parents/carers and collaboration with supporting children's learning. The 'Visualisation Learning' activities become a bridge between the two cultures of home and school. Parents/carers give feedback about progress. Home/school activities are completed with parents, grandparents, after school and in the morning. Children in one group believe they have 'got much better at spelling now', or 'I love spellings' and 'knew about them more 'cos I work with mum and dad'.

In the Forest of Sherwood the tale of Robin Hood feeding the poor by robbing the rich may be a myth; today's reality is that the poor are fed – educationally – by inspired and dedicated teachers. Now, that is a tale worth telling.

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