‘One school’s journey’ transcript

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PATRICK HAZELWOOD: Independent learning is when you go into a classroom and you don’t see the teacher, but you know the children are really actively engaged and committed to what they’re going.

LESLEY JAMES: Independent learning is when students are learning because they’re being asked to by a member of staff, but also because they want to themselves.

RICHARD SMITH: For me, it’s about giving students the opportunity to take control of their learning and be guided rather then led.

LESLEY JAMES: It’s the opposite, I suppose, of being a passive learner where, again, you’re sitting back, waiting to be to told what to do. You know what to do. You want to do it.

JACKIE BEERE: The best sort of the example of that is, you’re walking down the corridor and you can hear the children have already started work before you get there and actually walk in and they say, oh, yes, miss. We’re getting on. Sorry. We haven’t got time to talk to you, which is great.

RICHARD SMITH: Who wouldn’t want to do this? It’s just common sense.

NARRATOR: Fitzharrys in Oxfordshire is looking to develop an independent learning programme. Deputy head Julie Summerfield is keen to find out more about how it works.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: Fitzharrys is a school that’s vastly improved its learning outcomes for young people. It is also a school that wants to take that next step to be outstanding. We’ve done an awful lot of work with improving the quality of teaching and the quality of learning, and we also of mentor our students. And so we put lots of systems in place that are having the desired effect, but we would like to move from that big step from good to outstanding. The challenges for staff are to consider new ways of working.

What was your best bit of your morning?

To think about whether they can accommodate it within the curriculum that we already offer, or whether we need to make more radical changes to our curriculum. Staff are very willing to take on new ideas. It’s something that people are very passionate about developing already in the school. I think the key thing is, how do you do that.

NARRATOR: In order to find out, Julie is visiting St. John’s school Marlborough, for a chat with head teacher Patrick Hazelwood, a pioneer and keen advocate of independent learning.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: Good morning.

PATRICK HAZELWOOD: Hello there, Julie. Nice to see you.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: Pleased to meet you.

PATRICK HAZELWOOD: How are you?

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: Thank you very much for having me here today.

PATRICK HAZELWOOD: That’s a pleasure. Any time.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: I suppose my first question to you would be, why did you go along this line. Why did you develop the curriculum that you’ve got?

PATRICK HAZELWOOD: The main reason it was because we felt that the national curriculum, as it was, was constraining children’s opportunities to learn. So that’s where we started, and it was to convert the whole thing into a scenario where you could go into a classroom and the child would be in control. The children would be in control. Almost the teacher is invisible. At best, we would describe the teacher as facilitator, sometimes inspiration, sometimes almost not there at all.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: You mean in a kind of coach role or a mentoring role.

PATRICK HAZELWOOD: Yes. And it’s all of those things, but what it isn’t is the dictator at the front saying thou shalt do this and thou wilt do that. It’s very much about providing the environment in which the children can take control. And of course, the professional position is that that’s guided control. So what we’re trying to do at this stage is build up almost a momentum around this concept that you’re actually teachers of children, not teachers of subjects.

NARRATOR: That’s the theory. But how does it work in practise?

STUDENT: I’m doing, um two.

STUDENT: Two. I’ll do, then, as well. OK, you go first. You go first.

STUDENT: What I found out is that the Okapis live in the Zaire rainforest, which I think is in Africa.

TEACHER: It might be that on your leaflet, you actually don’t just write about your animals. You may choose to write about Sophie’s animal because she’s inspired you to think, oh, this is really interesting.

RICHARD SMITH: Initially, it was quite frightening because you hear these rumours about the fact, you’re going to have to rip up your lesson plans and let the children take over the lesson and it sounds riotous. That’s just complete nonsense, because actually what really happens is that they simply question and challenge not you as an individual or you as a teacher.

They just challenge what we’re doing in the classroom. And that’s great. You know, the 30 minds may have come up with a much better way of doing something than I have, so I’m more than happy to go with the flow.

CRAIG BRAKES: What I would like to do now, though, is to get into small groups and discuss these issues. OK?

You need to be really confident in your subjects, and you really need to be really excited about your subjects and enthusiastic about it, because they can come back with all types of questions. you need to have answers to their questions.

STUDENT: It’s going to cost a lot of money to clone something, and that’s taxpayers’ money.

STUDENT: How many cloning machines is there?

RICHARD SMITH: I think if you go into the classroom assuming that you know best and your way is the best way, then I think you’re doomed to failure. So you’ve got to have confidence in your abilities as a teacher, you’ve got to have confidence in your abilities as a learner, but you’ve also got to have the confidence to let go of things. You know? To not maintain an iron grip on the class.

STUDENT: That clone isn’t really you, in a way. Do you get what I’m saying?

CRAIG BRAKES: For the majority of students, it is very positive, for sure. I mean, you know, to be unleashed, as it were, or to have the shackles taken off of them in terms of the curriculum and what we’re supposed teach them, and not only in terms of what they learn, but also how they learn it. You know, its real freedom for them.

RICHARD SMITH: If we’re studying a novel for English, we have to study text, but why not make it a novel on a boy who’s got a heart defect so that when they go into the next lesson, they’re dissecting the heart, and then in the third lesson, they’re running around in PE and taking their pulse rate so that in math, the lesson afterwards, they’re plotting it on a bar graph.

They’re just taken one piece of learning and building on it all the time, continually consolidating what they’ve learned and, again, taking ownership, rather than these compartmentalised lessons which, they may as well be taking place on different planets.

NARRATOR: Inspired by her visit at St. John’s Julie heads back to Fitzharrys to reflect on what she’s seen and to plan her next steps.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: It’s always very useful to visit other schools, and you learn an awful lot from them. But I think there was a real buzz with the lessons that I observed in terms of students learning together, students really engaged with their learning, excited about their learning. And I think the most discernible observation was the fact that there was more student learning in the classroom on their own, rather than teachers leading that learning. So there was that kind of, like, vision, I suppose, we’d all like to aim for, where the students were actually working harder than the teachers.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

LIAM: My name’s Liam.

HARRY: My name’s Harry.

ELLIOT: My name’s Elliot. I was thinking about saying Bob. I was going to say Bob, but.

STUDENT: We sit in rows of – well, there’s the rows of fours in the middle, and then –

STUDENT: Sit in rows of two on the ride.

STUDENT: This side, and then on the other side, there’s rows of twos as well.

ELLIOTT: We sit on our own, and we want to talk to each other, which we sometimes do, and then we get told off. It’s like, some people know some answers and the others don’t, and then you might know an answer and you might want to talk and discuss about it, and I think that’s a good way of learning.

STUDENT: We do lots of listening when we’re in a classroom.

NARRATOR: To help with her plans for Fitzharrys, Julie enlists the support of independent learning consultant Jackie Beere.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: Morning, Jackie. Welcome to Fitzharrys. It’s lovely to see you.

I want to be able to move our school forward so that we get better outcomes for young people. I’m particularly passionate and interested to learn what your views are on in terms of developing our young people so they’re more independent learners.

JACKIE BEERE: You know, so the challenge is involving every child, encouraging them to be collaborative, and learn from each other, and teach each other. So we get that coaching model right in the classroom as well. And also, having that sort of a sense of getting children talking and learning more rather than the teacher talking. And I think that’s huge.

And if you think about in a school day, if children spent more time talking, and learning, and sharing, and collaborating, than the teachers spent leading, then actually, they learn a tremendous amount from that. And I do think the one thing we’ve got to bear in mind is that it is much easier teaching staff – you know, here’s my scheme. Here’s my concept, knowledge, stuff – than it is teaching ways of thinking.

So we are actually setting ourself a really, really tough challenge, because teaching ways of thinking, teaching ways of being, teaching learning behaviours is actually quite a challenge. But you can do it, but it’s much more – it’s not sort of something that’s just going to be a nice, even sort of – it’s going to be like that.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: Well, what do you think about the parent that is going to sort of say, well, my child’s got one teacher for all these subjects, but I’m concerned my student doesn’t have a maths teacher.

JACKIE BEERE: Well, I think, obviously, maths and English, there are some subjects that need specialist teachers and there’s absolutely no doubt about that, and subjects are very, very important. What I have experienced and seen with my own eyes is that you can combine subjects. You can also measure progress in those subjects while also teaching in a project-based way.

And in this world we live in, who knows what jobs are going to be available in 10 years’ time when these young people are trying to – you know, they need to be flexible and adaptable, don’t they?

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: And also, aren’t we sort of giving them the skills to be better parents themselves in terms of being able to recognise that they have to provide opportunities for future generations of children to be as independent as themselves?

JACKIE BEERE: Yes. Whereas at the moment, the trouble is that some parents don’t think, well, this isn’t what I did when I was at school. But this world has changed.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: So the visit to St. John’s was really good, because I came after that, and it sort of gives you a bit more inspiration to say –

I firmly believe in sort of involving all people in your vision, because if you don’t, then you can’t always take what you would like to do forward. I’m keen to discuss with the leadership team, and also to discuss with heads of department and class teachers about what I’ve observed, about what we’ve already achieved together, and how we think we can take our practise further to bring about more independent learning.

I feel in this school, we’re doing quite a lot of independent learning, but I also feel, as you know, that in order to move to outstanding, I think we need the children to be working harder than we are. The whole purpose of their curriculum was that they felt that it had become much more – it was too regimented. It was all based on targets, on achieving those targets. They didn’t think it was very child-centered. So they were brave enough as such to walk away from it and say, well, let’s create curriculum that is more personalised.

The content of the curriculum, I went and saw – and I’ve shown it to the leadership team. I’m happy to share it with you – is basically pretty much similar to what we’re doing now. I think the key thing is that, if you decided to do this in a team of teachers who worked with a group, we’re going to have to change the time commitment, because couldn’t you imagine? You’d want to meet, wouldn’t you?

But in our present framework, when would you meet? So we’d have to say, this is something we believe in. But I think to really get that buzz that I saw in that lesson with students really taking hold of their learning, then I think you have to start in year seven

TEACHER: If they’re doing an activity in science, and they do something similar in English, and similar in languages, and similar in RS, and they know that’s an activity they enjoy, then they don’t even think about I’m doing French. It’s just, I’m doing teamwork, and I love working in a team, and isn’t this a fun activity that we’re doing. And I think it maybe would help, actually, in certain ways.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: I think if we are determined about developing this independence, we’re going to have some falls. We’re going to have to take risks. But I’ve seen some of the rewards, and I think the rewards are worth the risk, personally.

TEACHER: We’re working in a school where we are getting the results, increasing every year. We’re doing a reasonable job with the students, but the students are still not doing themselves. We are doing the work for them. I think if there’s anything at all which we can do which encourages the students to say, yeah. let’s do it and be independent learners. That’s what we need.

JULIE SUMMERFIELD: It obviously makes sense to think about piloting a programme such as I’ve seen at St. John’s so that you’re actually developing those independent skills and those competencies that will make sure that people in the future, as learners, have those skills that employers want, and also further education wants.

NARRATOR: In programme two, we’ll be looking at further ways in which independent learning can be brought into the classroom.

[MUSIC PLAYING]