

INDEPENDENT
THINKING
ON ...

PRIMARY TEACHING

Mark Creasy

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR
WORKING SMARTER, NOT HARDER

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For Jessica. You inspired everything in this book;
now I hope it inspires you in your career.

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FIRST THOUGHTS

I don't think that staff in schools, anywhere, have ever had to work harder or had more expected of them than they do now. Pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and now, post-pandemic, the pressure keeps stacking up. This is a situation not helped by the fact that education is – as it has always been – a political football, which might explain why teachers so often feel as though they've been kicked around the park on a daily basis.

We're not going to change that, which means if we are looking to improve the way we work in the classroom to ease our workload, free up our evenings, improve the quality of pupils' outcomes for all the time and effort we put in and, who knows, even see something of a Sunday afternoon once in a while, we need to look to ourselves for help. And what better place to start than with a simple but very powerful question: why are you doing that?

Seriously, have you ever stopped and thought about that question? Just pause now and think about some of the things you do on a daily basis, the things that seem to define your working life. The things that mean that you spend most of your working week on the perennial hamster's wheel. Where did those practices come from? Why are things done that way and not another? Why are they even done at all?

Maybe you work the way you do because that is how it was demonstrated to you during your teacher training? Perhaps you picked up your methods during your first year as a teacher or from a mentor, if you were lucky enough to have one. Your methods worked that year, so why not continue? Or, alternatively, you could work the way you do because you have been told 'That's the way

things are done around here.' Perhaps no one even said those words to you explicitly, but that was the message you picked up. Who knows, maybe you're even doing things the way you do because that's what you remember from when you were at primary school?

Actions become habits, and habits become reality if you don't question them. You lose the ability to even recognise that you have a choice in how things are done if you're not careful. Or, just maybe, you have never really reflected on why you work the way you do. But, as is becoming increasingly important in our high-pressure, high-stakes, top-down model of education, there is always another way.

That is what I am attempting to highlight in this book: to reveal alternatives, to show how things can be done differently in primary classrooms everywhere. Not a massive revolution, but so many little changes that add up to something better. Everything you read is based on my experience in the classroom – having taught across the primary age range in a wide variety of settings from tough estate schools to the independent sector – and I aim to highlight what you really can achieve when you tackle everyday matters with an 'other way' mindset.

I have tried to address what I see as the key elements for working in primary schools today, whatever your setting. Admittedly, I may have missed a few. It's a big job we do, after all. However, I have examined everyday practices and how the same – or even better – results can be achieved, not by *working harder*, as if that were possible, but by following the old adage of *working smarter*. To this end, throughout the book, I have included sets of working smarter tips which will act as a guide and a prompt to different ways of working. Alongside these, I have also included some questions, provocations and points of reflection. After all, I don't have all the answers and you will

FIRST THOUGHTS

create even more alternative possibilities by thinking for yourself and reflecting on your own working practices.

Nothing I advocate here requires huge investments of time or money. Everything is also designed to help you reclaim your evenings and weekends, something more teachers need to do than is healthy for any profession. Too many teachers are way too close to breaking point, as evidenced by the perennial problems of recruitment and retention. If we take it on ourselves to reevaluate our work and learn to be a whole lot smarter about it, this will surely help.

CHAPTER 1

DAILY ROUTINES

This is the first chapter, not only because for many of us routines are the first part of the day, but also because I believe that from these small acorns, great oaks really can grow. By 'routine' I am referring to all of the things that primary school teachers do on a daily basis that have little, or no, relation to teaching and learning: the administrative, bureaucratic, often whole-school elements of the day that no one ever seems to talk about during teacher training.

WHY ARE ROUTINES IMPORTANT?

Simply put, they provide structure and regularity for the teacher and the learners. Well-considered, organised and structured routines offer huge benefits to everyone as they provide certainty and clarity. The teacher and the learner can be certain that there are things that *have* to be done and that there are ways *in which* they have to be done.

When routines are flawed and haven't been properly considered, they become burdensome and time-consuming, getting in the way of learning. Any lack of clarity and consistency from the teacher leads to confusion for the learners, plus, for some, the opportunity to exploit the cracks for mischief and misdemeanours of their own.

If you want to see with your own eyes the power of effectively crafted routines, simply spend some time with your

early years and foundation stage (EYFS) colleagues, especially during the self-directed learning elements of the children's day. Thanks to providing clear routines and responsibilities for the children, and having high expectations of them, the potential for chaos is averted and the room is, in fact, more akin to an orchestra playing a well-composed symphony or a ballet company performing a beautifully choreographed dance than the mad supermarket trolley dash many would envisage.

To achieve this carefully crafted performance there will have been thought, consideration and plenty of training, plus more than a few missteps along the way. However, in a short space of time, the EYFS teacher has the classroom working how they want it to. Ask yourself, if it can be done with the youngest members of the school, why not with the older ones?

Throughout this chapter I will explore those things that everyone has to navigate every day, including:

- The start of the day.
- How the children enter your classroom.
- How you meet and greet them and how they are settled.
- Taking the register and lunch orders.
- Getting to and from – and running – assemblies.
- Seating and groups.
- Getting your class' attention.
- The end of the school day.

These are activities that are usually part of your whole-school responsibilities or are determined by the head teacher. However, I will ask you to reconsider how you

organise them in order to take ownership. Before I go through these daily routines, I think it is important to start with another set of behaviours which are common to every classroom; the benefits of getting them right are huge, but so many of us slip up when it comes to applying and sticking to them. Of course, I am talking about ...

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS/ NON-NEGOTIABLES

Unlike in secondary schools – where there's usually a set of predetermined school rules, often individually interpreted by each teacher a child meets on their timetable – primary schools do try to involve the children in the process of rule creation. We frequently see this as an exercise in democracy – I'll come back to this important notion later – and an opportunity to engage with the children so that we can refer back to the expectations, often with a flourish, as we remonstrate with the class, 'Come on, 3B – what did we all agree about this six months ago?'

These classroom expectations are usually created at the start of the year, including expectations for written and numerical work too, frequently in conversation with the children, and then printed, laminated and put up on the wall for all to see. I have even seen some teachers who get all the children to sign the list of agreed expectations, as some sort of contract. However, this in itself creates a problem, which I'll address shortly.

Ideally, when crafting this list, the children will come up with the ideas that you already had in your head and life will move on swimmingly. Unfortunately, this doesn't always happen. For example, in stating writing expectations, too many children in Key Stage 2 will still talk about

capital letters and full stops, which is a Key Stage 1 expectation. It may well be OK to include this as an expectation in the initial stages of their transition from Key Stage 1 into Key Stage 2 but it should certainly not be an expectation beyond this point. I would even advocate revisiting Year 3 expectations in January to remove that element and look ahead, rather than backwards. Another example is when crafting the expectations for working in maths. Teachers will be told that one digit per square should be an expectation in Key Stage 2, even though that's been in place ever since the children started working in books and shouldn't need restating.

When considering how you and your class create your shared expectations, what about ...

NOT STARTING WITH THE EXPECTATIONS ON THE FIRST DAY?

Instead, you could wait a week and then review what you have seen and discuss with the children what has worked and what has not. This will also allow the children to get a feel for how you want to run your classroom – never forget that it is *your* classroom. You are the adult, paid to lead it. I have always found that it helps to consider the classroom as more of a benevolent dictatorship than a democracy; the children have the power, as long as you let them.

PROVIDING THE CHILDREN WITH A LIST OF YOUR OPTIONS?

Rather than simply let the children choose their list, offer them a longlist first. This then can be whittled down to what all teachers have, which is an optimum number of ~~rules~~ expectations (for me it's seven).

Alternatively, you could use a 'self-pair-square' or 'snowball' idea to develop the expectations. This means that the

children individually select their own preferences from the list, then agree these with a partner, before establishing the final selection in a group, after which you take responses from the groups. Or simply provide the children with the list and have a straightforward vote – this also involves less of a sense of personal defeat for the children as it is the teacher's ideas being voted on, not theirs.

I would also suggest that this approach works really well when used at the end of the first week. This way you get to highlight all of the positives that you have seen, and note the things that the children do automatically, so you don't need to waste time restating them.

START WITH THE EXPECTATIONS FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR?

During your handover, why not carry over the expectations from the previous year and apply them from day one in your class? This brings with it familiarity for the children and it's hard to imagine any teacher will have previously established anything drastically different. Then, at some point within the first half term – personally I'd wait no more than a fortnight – review, edit and adapt them. Phrasing this exercise along the lines of, 'We've worked really well with these expectations, but they were for Year X; you're now Year Y, so are there any that you think we should change?' will help. Again, providing your own list of options to choose from, including the current expectations, will aid the process.

The bigger challenge, though, isn't so much how you come to a list of classroom expectations, it's sticking to them. These are, after all, your non-negotiables. And they are for everybody. For example, a common one, on every class' list up and down the country, would be along the lines of: 'We take it in turns to speak and listen to each

other.' Which is all well and good in theory, but is it applied in practice? Moreover, is it applied rigorously and judiciously? Or, as is often the case, is this expectation referred to simply:

- When a discussion has got out of hand?
- When people have started shouting?
- When you're not being listened to?
- When it's 'that child'?
- When you've had enough of 'that child', but instead pick on someone else who is far easier to deal with?

WORKING SMARTER TIPS

MAKE EVERYONE ACCOUNTABLE

If you're going to have a list of expectations for your class, ensure that everyone, including the adults, is responsible for themselves, all of the time. That way *everyone* is held to account. Once you have created your expectations, it is everyone's job to adhere to them. True, early on in your relationships with a class there may need to be more frequent reminders, but within a short period of time everyone *knows* that these really are expectations and that they are to be maintained. Examples include:

- An expectation of not talking over each other. Challenge it *every* time.
- One digit per square. Get work rewritten to follow what's been agreed.

PAINTS A VIVID PICTURE OF LIFE IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL AND SHARES TOP TIPS ON HOW TO ENRICH CHILDREN'S LEARNING AT NO EXTRA COST TO TEACHERS' TIME OR THE SCHOOL BUDGET.

Primary school teachers are working harder than ever, and have more and more to do in the finite time they have with their pupils, but Mark Creasy believes it doesn't need to be like this.

In *Independent Thinking on Primary Teaching*, Mark encourages teachers to stop and consider the things they do daily in the classroom and offers suggestions to help them achieve the same (or even better) results by working smarter, not harder.

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Mark Creasy is an Independent Thinking Associate and experienced primary school teacher. His contemporary and down-to-earth style of teaching has allowed him to view learning as a tool, not a rule, to ensure that his pupils are given the right to an education that suits their needs and maximises their potential for future success. Mark is also the author of Unhomework, which challenges the orthodoxies about work outside the classroom. @EP3577

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