

Developing the Expertise of Primary and Elementary Classroom Teachers

Professional Learning for a
Changing World

Tony Eaude

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Developing the Expertise of Primary and Elementary Classroom Teachers

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Introduction

In *How Do Expert Primary Classteachers Really Work? A Critical Guide for Teachers, Headteachers and Teacher Educators* (Eaude, 2012), I drew on the research on expertise and teacher expertise – summarized in Chapter 21 of the *Cambridge Primary Review* (Alexander, 2010) – to try and describe how those who are really good at teaching a class of young children act and think.

That book had three main aims, to:

- indicate that teaching a class of young children is immensely complicated and requires distinctive qualities, skills, types of knowledge and understanding of how young children learn;
- identify in some detail the features of the pedagogy involved, without falling into the trap of saying that there is any one model to emulate; and
- start to suggest how such expertise, both one's own and other people's, is, and can be, developed.

I have written further about the first two of these in Eaude (2014a, 2015) but not on the third. This book aims to fill this gap, but it is not:

- a manual for those learning to be teachers in Initial Teacher Education (ITE; pre-qualification) or for those who lead or tutor such courses;
- a primer to say how to get an outstanding grade at the end of a teaching practice or the next school inspection; or
- a response to the latest policy or government diktat.

Nor is it the result of a particular research project. Rather, what follows is a summary of, and reflection on, the implications of many disparate pieces of research and my own, and other teachers', experiences. It is designed to enable readers to understand more about the task of teaching a class of young children, trying to distinguish what is specific about this, as opposed to teaching an early years or a

secondary history or maths class; and to reflect, in the light of research and their own experience, on how the types of expertise involved can be developed.

This book is intended to provoke thought and challenge assumptions for an international audience. It is written mainly for teacher educators and those who are teachers of young children, in whatever country or jurisdiction, and, to some extent, those studying to become such teachers. By teacher educators, I do not mean only people with a job in a Higher Education Institution or a programme leading to qualification. I include those in senior positions in, and those who support, primary schools. In fact, I shall suggest that all teachers should see themselves increasingly as teacher educators. In the final chapter, I consider the implications for teacher educators working with teachers before and after qualification and for policymakers, though sadly I hold out little hope that the latter will manage, yet, to escape the current emphasis on measurable outcomes in a narrow range of the curriculum.

The main focus is on teachers of children in the 5- to 11-year-old age group, although there are lessons to be learned from, and by, those who teach older and younger children. This age group covers roughly what psychoanalysts call the latency period, though, as Waddell (2002) points out, individuals can exhibit a latency mentality at any time. The latency period is a time of gathering resources between the turbulence of the early years and that of adolescence and is often characterized by children's worry about new challenges but increasing ability to manage their world. I mostly use the term 'young' to describe these children and 'primary' for the schools they attend, equivalent to what in many countries are called 'elementary'. However, at times, I use the term 'elementary schools' to refer to those in England before the 1944 Education Act. Where I write of headteachers and local authorities, this equates roughly to principals and school boards. The term 'special educational needs' is similar to what is called 'learning disabilities' in some systems.

My emphasis is on the *classroom* teacher working with young children for two main reasons:

- a significant element of teaching a class involves managing a wide range of needs – academic, social and emotional – and expectations of a large, usually disparate, group of children, who all bring different types of experience, knowledge and interests; and
- the focus of most research about teacher development is on specific subjects, whereas a major challenge for most primary classroom teachers is how to cater for the whole range of children's needs.

However, Chapter 5 addresses the contested question of the advantages and disadvantages of children spending most of their time with one teacher, particularly towards the end of primary school.

This book is written in the context, in England and many other countries, of unprecedented interference in how primary teachers work, from politicians and self-proclaimed experts, many of whom have little recent experience of the primary classroom. Such experts often have definite views on particular subjects or programmes that ‘work.’ But I shall suggest that such views misunderstand and underplay the challenges, and dilemmas, which primary classroom teachers face every day.

I try to counter four, usually implicit, assumptions about teaching young children:

1. often from those who have not taught young children, that doing so is easy and does not require a great depth of knowledge or academic ability;
2. usually from those who want quick results, that teachers should just follow someone else’s script rather than engage with the complexity of making professional judgements;
3. that good teaching mainly involves the teacher speaking and children listening, as opposed to the latter being active and engaged participants in making sense of their experiences; and
4. how one teaches is, or should be, based mainly on rational thinking rather than a mixture of emotion, intuition and deliberation.

In Eade (2016a), I argued that primary education has not shaken off the legacy of elementary schools set up in the late nineteenth century, where a narrow curriculum was taught largely by teachers with few qualifications, if any, using a limited range of mostly didactic methods. Primary teaching still tends to be associated with a similar approach and students, teachers and teacher educators are encouraged to focus on subject knowledge and behaviour management. This book explores why such a view of the role is too limited and how the necessary expertise can be developed.

I suggest that if primary classroom teachers are to convince others of what the task – which Bibby (2011) calls an ‘impossible profession’ – involves and develop their own and other colleagues’ expertises, the detail must be explored and articulated. Doing so is not easy. In 1981, Brian Simon published an article called ‘Why No Pedagogy in England?’. This was followed by Robin Alexander’s (2004) ‘Still No Pedagogy? Principle, Pragmatism and Compliance in Primary Education’. Both suggested that teachers in England are reluctant to discuss

pedagogy, with Alexander arguing that they have become trapped in a culture of compliance. Many primary teachers – at least in England – are suspicious of theory and are reluctant, and find it hard, to discuss the detail of pedagogy, though perhaps they are now more prepared to do so, at least in some respects. In other countries, teachers may be more used to doing so, though policy tends to encourage teaching in particular ways. Many teachers of young children are self-effacing and even unaware of their strengths, but acutely aware of their shortcomings. Even those with a high level of expertise are often unsure, modest or reticent about saying how they act and think. This tends to lead to primary teachers, especially those who are perfectionists, focusing on their shortcomings rather than on their strengths.

One result is that politicians have stepped into the arena of pedagogy and prescribed how teachers, especially those working with young children, should work, in ways inconceivable in professions such as medicine or architecture. The teaching profession shares some of the blame and the answer lies to a large extent in our hands. Unless what really good teaching involves can be articulated more clearly, informed by research on how young children learn and the profession's collective wisdom, children and teachers will remain vulnerable to short-term, ill-informed solutions being imposed.

One might argue – and many people do – that the complexity of the role and the need for greater consistency means that teaching must be simplified, using what Sawyer (2004: 13) calls 'scripted instruction'. However, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012: xiii) suggest that it is a false road, adopted in many countries, 'to make teaching simpler; to diminish teachers' judgement and professionalism so that less-qualified people can do it', with a restricted curriculum, overreliance on technology, prescription of how teachers teach and little recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity. In supporting this, I shall argue that:

- such an approach is particularly detrimental for young children and those who teach them;
- teacher education must help deepen teachers' knowledge of how children learn and enable them to cope with the messy, confusing, paradoxical world of the classroom, without oversimplifying or limiting children's learning; and
- how to teach young children is learned, as with other occupations which require rapid decision-making, mainly through practice, watching other teachers at work, experimentation and reflection, initially with close supervision and guidance and then with increasing independence.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012: 2) indicate that countries such as Finland and South Korea, widely seen as successful, adopt a 'professional capital' route which assumes that good teaching:

- is technically sophisticated and difficult;
- requires a high level of education and long periods of training;
- is perfected through continuous improvement;
- involves wide judgement, informed by evidence and experience;
- is a collective accomplishment and responsibility; and
- maximizes, mediates and moderates online involvement.

Apart from the last of these being more relevant to older students, and the omission of learning relationships (see TLRP, 2006), this list provides a good foundation for understanding the complexity of the primary classroom teacher's role and how the expertises required can be learned.

Primary classroom teachers are unlikely to be equipped to meet the challenges they face day in and day out, with the confidence required to exercise professional judgement, unless they, and teacher educators, understand and address the complexity of the role. Rethinking how best to teach young children, and support teachers in doing so, is very hard in a culture which emphasizes 'delivery' of programmes and content knowledge, following the script and achieving measurable outcomes, in a climate of performativity and high-stakes accountability, and underplays professional judgement. This book encourages readers to rethink what the role entails and explores what individual teachers, mentors and teacher educators can do in such a climate. The conclusions are relatively simple to understand, however difficult they may be to implement, using an apprenticeship model, enriched by applying theoretical knowledge appropriately and underpinned by a robust identity as a professional, with a sense of agency and autonomy. Teachers themselves have to be active participants in this process, though they benefit from other people's support, with teacher education a creative, and ideally a collective, process.

Let me explain briefly the perspective from which I write. I was a classroom teacher for thirteen years, from 1976 to 1989, in two primary schools, before working as the headteacher of a multicultural first school for nine years. I then studied for a doctorate, looking at how teachers of young children understand spiritual development. Subsequently, I have worked independently, mostly supporting teachers and writing, though until three years ago I continued to do some teaching of young children. So, my experience has been mostly, though not exclusively, in England and related to schools, rather than in other countries or in ITE.

I present unfamiliar, sometimes controversial, views of what being a primary classroom teacher entails and of how the elements of expertise are learned, and refined, over time, using case studies and stories to illustrate ideas and relate these to practical situations. I try to write about complex ideas in simple language where possible. Terms such as 'expertise', 'pedagogy' and 'tacit knowledge' may be somewhat daunting, but are helpful in challenging simplistic notions about learning and teaching, especially with a class of young children. This is comparable to how we expect doctors to be able to explain symptoms and diagnoses in simple terms, but have a professional language less easily understood by lay people. A glossary is included so that readers can check what less familiar terms mean.

As we shall see, much of the language used in education is slippery, in the sense that many ideas accepted without question – such as standards, curriculum and professionalism – are more contestable than they may seem. I explore what commonly used terms, which can easily be clichés, actually entail when working with young children and how these are related to the complex web of skills and qualities required to fulfil the role. For instance, no one doubts that teacher expectations should be high, but when teaching a class of young children they must also be broad and realistic. A constant emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic, rather than the humanities and the arts, let alone photography and astronomy, cooking and chess (and much more, including how to understand their own feelings and to relate to other people), easily limits our, and the children's, hopes and expectations of what they can achieve.

You may be suspicious of the terms 'expert' and 'expertise.' I am increasingly unsure about whether the idea of 'being an expert' is helpful, especially in a context where so many people (like me) claim to know more about teaching than teachers themselves. The term 'expertise' has connotations that technical competence is all that is needed but teaching young children also has a strong ethical dimension, related to the sort of people teachers hope that children will become and the type of society they can help to create. Expertise as a primary classroom teacher involves much more than teaching an outstanding lesson or applying 'what works', since the task is best understood over a longer time period and what works well in one context may not in another. Doing so requires qualities, such as enthusiasm and patience, as well as the ability to demonstrate, to explain, to listen – and much more. No teacher is an expert in every aspect or situation. The different types of expertise have to be learned, refined and regularly refreshed. Moreover, the task is so multifaceted that it may help to think of an individual manifesting varying levels of expertise in different aspects of the

role. Therefore, I use ‘with a high level of expertise,’ rather than referring to individual teachers as experts.

Perhaps teachers are wise to be wary of experts, especially those not actually engaged in the task. Despite this, the ideas associated with expertise help me to understand why teaching a class of young children looks so easy when done well and is so hard when one tries to do it. For me, these ideas, described in my previous work and summarized in Chapter 3, give a much more convincing picture of what teaching a class of young children is really like – messy, funny, infuriating, unpredictable, exhausting, fascinating – than the manuals which say what it should be like.

Shulman (2005) uses the idea of ‘signature pedagogies’ to describe the main ways in which those new to a profession are taught and expected to learn three fundamental dimensions of professional work – to *think*, to *perform* and to *act with integrity*. Shulman suggests that signature pedagogies tell us much about how professionals are expected to act, not only those actions which are visible, but the deep, implicit structure and assumptions about what being a profession, and a professional, entails. For instance, doctors are expected to learn through observing more experienced colleagues, lawyers by discussing cases, engineers by working alongside those with more experience.

It is not obvious to me that there is a distinctive signature pedagogy for learning to teach young children. Though there is a huge literature on primary education and teacher education, the detail of how those who teach classes of young children learn to do so with a high level of expertise and the implications for teacher educators remains relatively unresearched and articulated. For example, the BERA/RSA (2014) report argues for teaching as a profession, and ITE, to take more account of research evidence, but makes only a passing reference to primary education.

Thomson and Hall (2015: 421) argue that signature pedagogies are:

- epistemological, dealing with things that we have to know and know how to do;
- axiological, about ways of working; and
- ontological, about the way we are in the world and the ways in which we orient ourselves to being and making meaning in the world,

continuing that, while these elements cannot be separated in practice, this distinction provides a helpful way of advancing our understanding of what those new to the profession, and teacher educators, should concentrate on.

This book tentatively explores what a signature pedagogy for primary teaching might look like, including the three elements highlighted above: broadly speaking, types of knowledge, ways of working and professional identity. I argue for a career-long approach which enables classroom teachers to work skilfully, fluidly and reciprocally in a range of contexts, using a wide repertoire of teaching methods with confidence and a sense of agency, and supports them in doing so with increasing levels of expertise.

Let me set out ten assumptions, supported in subsequent chapters:

- teachers have a vital role in enhancing the whole range of children's learning, though the structures in which they work affect considerably how they teach;
- children, and their teachers, must be educated to cope with a world of change, for which they require qualities such as adaptability and resilience, and the disposition to manifest these, as well as knowledge and skills;
- there are many disparate elements involved in teaching a class of young children and to do so well is very difficult;
- teaching a class of young children makes strong emotional as well as cognitive demands and teachers must learn to deal with both;
- teaching a class of young children has similarities with teaching a class of older children, but many distinctive elements;
- not all primary classroom teachers can, or will, develop a high level of expertise but all can become more expert in some respects;
- how such expertise is learned remains something of a mystery, but takes a long time and considerable effort and commitment;
- teachers must recognize opportunities and constraints to have much chance of exploiting and overcoming these;
- teacher education should continue throughout every teacher's professional life; and
- how teachers learn echoes, more than we imagine, how children learn.

Teaching a class of young children involves several parallel strands, simultaneously, with expertise in different aspects built up at different rates. Inevitably, the higher levels will be learned mostly after qualification. While the pre-qualification period lays vital foundations which determine to what extent this takes place, such courses are short. So, more emphasis on post-qualification, in-service learning and support is required. The latter is often described as continuous professional development (CPD) but too frequently formal opportunities consist of short, decontextualized courses on how to deliver particular

programmes. The term ‘career long professional learning’ (CLPL), as adopted in Scotland (see Donaldson, 2010), captures the idea of a continuum from before embarking on a course, or other route, leading to qualification, into the induction, early-career period and throughout every teacher’s career.

Teaching with a high level of expertise involves seeing teaching, and oneself as a teacher, in different ways from those which currently dominate our thinking; and re-examining many fundamental assumptions about the nature of knowledge and learning and teaching. Learning and refining the necessary expertises is not just about gathering tips and techniques, though most teachers are like jackdaws who love to collect new ideas from other people. It requires thinking through how best to engage and inspire a disparate group of children, not just in learning skills related to literacy and numeracy, but across the whole curriculum. As we shall see, considering aims and purposes, and aligning these with how one teaches, is an integral part of teacher expertise. So, as well as subject knowledge and technical skills, teacher education must be concerned with teacher identity and professionalism, as discussed in Chapters 8 and 9.

Becoming a primary classroom teacher is a journey through uncertain terrain, from starting to think about becoming a teacher, through a course leading to qualification, then the early, demanding, years of teaching and into the (usually somewhat easier) time when a teacher has several years’ experience. The journey does not follow a straight, smooth path, but an often confusing, rocky route, with many unforeseen opportunities, distractions and hazards along the way, rather like the Pilgrim’s Progress. And one never quite arrives, because the complexity of the role means that one can always build up more expertise – and can easily lose expertise, or find that it has become blunted.

The journey is an individual one, but companions, mentors and guides can help teachers to exploit the opportunities and overcome the hazards. Some of these people may have formal roles, like tutors on ITE courses or mentors in school, while others may be more informal such as colleagues in school or partners and friends outside teaching. For the journey, one needs a metaphorical backpack in which to store tools, techniques and directions. But teachers gradually come to rely less on these and more on their own qualities and abilities, with the support of others, as they internalize the types of knowledge and expertises involved.

This book concentrates more on the processes of how teacher expertise is learned than programmes or structures. However, I touch on the latter, emphasizing the need for a culture where policy enables rather than restricts. Where appropriate, I highlight implications for those starting out in teaching and those who are more experienced and for those working with different age groups and specific contexts.

The book is in three parts. Part One sets the scene. Chapter 1 outlines the context in which primary teachers and teacher educators work. Chapter 2 explores the complexity of the primary classroom teacher's role, encouraging readers to rethink what it entails and recognize the opportunities and challenges. Chapter 3 summarizes key lessons about how primary classroom teachers with a high level of expertise act and think and the interlinked types of knowledge they use.

Part Two explores how the many interlinked types of knowledge and expertises used by primary classroom teachers can be developed. Chapter 4 provides an overview, highlighting the processes involved. Chapter 5 considers the amount and types of subject, or disciplinary, knowledge required, given the expectation that primary classroom teachers will usually teach a wide range of subjects; and argues that pedagogical content knowledge matters more than subject knowledge, as such. Chapter 6 examines what is meant by craft and case knowledge in teaching young children, and how this is used and refined. Chapter 7 discusses why personal and interpersonal knowledge is so vital in teaching a class of young children and how teachers can build up and internalize the necessary qualities.

Part Three explores professional identity as a primary classroom teacher and how this is shaped. Chapter 8 discusses teacher identity and contrasting conceptions of professionalism and why these matter, arguing that expertise is associated with a robust but flexible sense of identity and an extended professionalism. Chapter 9 considers how these are formed and can be maintained, emphasizing the value of professional learning communities, and discusses opportunities and challenges during teachers' careers. Chapter 10 ties the argument together, summarizing key issues for teachers and teacher educators in the pre- and post-qualification periods, and for research and policy.

The book deals with complex questions, to which there are no easy answers. I do not expect that you will agree with everything I write, but hope that you will be prompted to think deeply about what makes teaching a class of young children such a wonderful and creative, and at times such a tiring and exasperating, task. It may help to keep thinking about your own development, as a teacher (if you are one) and in some other practical activity, from dressmaking to dancing, from sport to singing, and try to recall how you felt when new to the task, how you learned the expertises required and critical influences on how this happened. I hope that by the end you will share my belief that a much broader, deeper and more nuanced understanding of the primary classroom teacher's role is needed – and have greater insight into how the expertises involved can best be learned and applied.

Part One

Setting the Scene

The Context of Primary Education and Teacher Education

Chapter outline

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Teachers are not deliverers but developers of learning. Those who focus only on teaching techniques and curriculum standards ... promote a diminished view of teaching and teacher professionalism that has no place in a sophisticated knowledge society.

—Hargreaves, *Teaching in the Knowledge Society*, 161

The historic status of primary teachers and teacher education

This chapter discusses the context in which primary classroom teachers and teacher educators work. It will show that, historically, the role's complexity has been understated and teachers have been expected to deliver a narrow curriculum. Increasingly, in recent years, this view has been reinforced by an undue focus of measurable outcomes and teacher standards or competences. Subsequent chapters will suggest that the features of expertise provide a more nuanced and convincing way of understanding what the role entails, and therefore of what

priorities for teacher educators should be, than the simplistic and reductionist view described here.

The first section provides a brief overview of key themes in England and internationally. Inevitably, this discussion risks being somewhat anglocentric and results in generalizations which may not apply to particular countries, systems or schools. The aims of education and what, and how, teachers are expected to teach depend heavily on the social and cultural context. As Alexander (2000) shows in his detailed comparison of pedagogy in primary education in five systems, methods and expectations reflect, and vary according to, the traditions of different countries, though they also change over time. The opportunities and constraints vary significantly between cultures, systems and schools. However, unless one recognizes that current assumptions are not universal and have not always held sway, it is hard to realize that there are alternative ways of acting and thinking which may be more appropriate to enhance young children's learning; and so try to develop these.

Before the 1944 Education Act, young children in England were taught in elementary schools created in the nineteenth century to prepare them for a life of work which did not involve sophisticated skills and decision-making. There was a strong emphasis on what is often characterized as 'the 3Rs' – reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic – 'the basics'. Alexander (2010) calls this Curriculum 1, indicating that, though the detail may change, with science and technology sometimes included, such an emphasis has proved very persistent across time and cultures, with Curriculum 2 – the rest, including the humanities and the arts – regarded as mattering far less. The curriculum in elementary schools was narrow and taught largely by teachers, mostly women, with few qualifications, if any, and a low status. Teaching methods consisted of a limited range of mostly didactic pedagogy, based on the transmission of content knowledge.

The Hadow Report of 1931, on young children's education, stated that 'the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than knowledge to be found and facts to be stored' (see Alexander, 2010: 21, for a discussion of the implications). The years following the 1944 Act saw tentative moves towards a broader, more holistic view of the primary curriculum, with greater emphasis on Curriculum 2 and children learning through active experience. In the late 1950s and 1960s, primary teachers in England were increasingly encouraged to adopt an approach based on teaching mainly through topics rather than discrete subjects. The Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) advocated this approach which was characterized by language such as 'progressive', 'child-centred' and 'good primary practice'. What these meant was always vague and,