

How can I improve learning in my class through the explicit teaching of emotional literacy? An educational enquiry.

MASTERS ASSIGNMENT

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Introduction

This enquiry has evolved over a number of months in response to a particular situation within my class that challenged me to investigate the process by which children learn most effectively and to consider the impact of emotional literacy on their learning. When I began the process I was expecting to discover that once the social and emotional issues in my class were resolved, academic learning would improve independently. I have concluded however, that academic learning and emotional literacy are connected in a vital way that I had not anticipated, and that my educational and spiritual values are also an important factor in developing the children's attitude to their learning.

My enquiry will begin with some background information about me, about why I became a teacher and about my values and their influence in my teaching. I will then explain the difficulties I was facing with a particularly challenging child and how this led me to introduce the explicit teaching of emotional literacy to my class; I will offer evidence from within the class to support any claims I make. I will also demonstrate how I have engaged with the critical thinking of others in the field of educational research and emotional literacy to frame my enquiry and how I have used a number of action reflection cycles in the process, based on the approach outlined in *Action*

Research for Teachers, A Practical Guide (Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead, 2005).

When I joined my present school I deliberately chose to work in a faith school. It was and still is very important to me that the ethos in my school reflects the Christian gospel values that I share. I wholeheartedly support and endorse those values, expressed to our school community through the Mission Statement as follows:

St John's Mission Statement

I am unique
In the eyes of God,
All seeing, all knowing, all
Loving,
He embraces our family,
Parish, parent, child.
All one with you.
I am of the world,
With the seeds of excellence
Within me,
Encouraged to grow and flourish
To a spiritual fulfillment.
I am unique,
And with you beside me,
All is possible.

Why Am I A Teacher?

In the early 1990s as a stay at home mother of three young children and with my husband made redundant from his job, it was the encouragement of the former priest in my parish that led me to consider working with children as the next step in my life. He saw gifts in me that I did not even recognize that I had at that time and he encouraged me to use them, initially teaching French to young children at home, then tutoring GCSE and "A" level students. This eventually led to my PGCE in 1997 and I never forgot his encouragement and belief in my abilities. Encouragement became an important value in my own teaching career and in the relationships I built with the children in my class.

Context

At the beginning of this academic year I was faced with a particularly difficult mixed age infant class which did not respond to me as I would normally have expected. I struggled to relate to and control this mixed class of 21 Year 2s, (one with Tourettes Syndrome about which I knew very little), and 8 Year 1s. Over a two week period I was losing the battle. The children were noisy and undisciplined, both in whole class and group sessions. I also noticed that they had social problems, ranging from aggressive, unruly behaviour to social interaction difficulties on the playground and during "choosing" times in class, and some were withdrawn, immature and tearful, both in class and on the playground.

Four children were new to the school, including the boy with Tourettes syndrome and one girl was returning to school after a long period of absence and problems at home.

In addition to the challenges outlined above, more than half of the children in Year 2 were struggling to access the curriculum - they did not respond to my "usual" teaching methods, were not engaged and lacked motivation and focus. I was struggling to cope and was becoming increasingly stressed and anxious myself.

I will now explain what happened next, using the structure of Belle Wallace's TASC wheel (shown in Appendix 1) which allowed me to organize my thinking and learning process in the following way:

Gather/Organise/Identify - What do I know about this/What is the task?

As a first attempt at moving this situation forward I began to think more deeply about how I might use the very values which had drawn me to teaching in the first place to help the children in my class. How could I build a relationship with every child? How could I show them that I believed in them? How could I develop their self-esteem and encourage them to want to learn?

I had been reading "The New Leaders" by Daniel Goleman as a Performance Management target, and was struck by some of the similarities between the relationships I hoped to build in my class and those in a successful business

team as described in Goleman's book. I definitely wanted to create "resonance" in my class;

"When a leader triggers resonance, you can read it in people's eyes: They're engaged and they light up." p.24

I began to realize that the emotional intelligence domains and competencies described by Goleman as "self-awareness", "self-management", "social awareness" and "relationship management" (p.49) were those that I was trying to help the children develop to enable them to:

- understand their own feelings, their own strengths and to develop their own self-esteem
- learn to control and appropriately express their own feelings and to become self-motivated in their desire to learn
- understand the feelings of others and develop empathy and understanding of other's feelings and concerns
- resolve disagreements and build good relationships

I decided to try to develop the children's emotional intelligence, to first help them to deal with some of the social and emotional issues which were preventing them from learning and then to move on to the most effective ways of helping them to become self-motivated learners.

Generate - How many ideas can I think of?

I still wasn't sure how to do this but the first breakthrough came in the form of advice from a teacher with the Behaviour Support Team who came to support me and to work alongside the little boy with Tourettes twice a week. I realized that many of the strategies that she was suggesting for him

would benefit everyone in the class and indeed all of the following strategies had positive results, which I will now explain:

- I displayed photos of children in the class showing them working quietly, changing sensibly for PE, lining up calmly etc.

This had an immediate positive effect as it was a visual reminder of my expectations and the children also responded well to seeing photographs of themselves displayed in class, making them feel valued.

- I introduced a seating plan for carpet sessions - each child was given his/her own place next to someone I knew they could do paired work with and who they would not clash with.

The children learnt the seating plan after one session and they stopped milling around on the carpet, looking around to see where others were sitting and then changing places themselves several times before they sat down. There was an immediate impact on learning too because the children settled more quickly so we could get on with the lesson.

- I introduced a whole class reward chart allowing me to give individual praise and encouragement daily, giving stickers and housepoints to all children who deserved them.

This was a very popular strategy, although I felt I needed to refine what I was giving praise for.

- I organized time-out for the little boy with Tourettes if he became too agitated in whole class lessons.

I provided him with his own workstation and some resources to help him to calm down quietly - stress ball etc. He has now become a little more independent and able to recognize when he needs to take "time-out" - if he feels that he needs to shout loudly for example - and the other children sometimes suggest to him that he ought to go for "time-out" to calm down.

- I introduced a daily Circle Time after lunchtime play to encourage the children to enter class quietly, with music playing, to have a drink then to sit down and have the register in a circle. There followed a short circle time, allowing particular playtime and relationship issues to be discussed where strategies to prevent them from happening again could also be explored. I used this time together to explore their feelings after lunchtime, using pictures of faces with a range of expressions.

This had the most dramatic impact on the children's behaviour. The music had a calming effect on loud voices and the opportunity to discuss and contextualize their feelings and concerns from the playground was very helpful for them. I used the pictures of faces with happy, sad, disappointed and angry expressions again and again to encourage the children to consider their own and other's feelings as a result of particular behaviour and situations on the playground. The children quickly

seemed to become more in touch with their feelings and several expressed their feelings very clearly:

- Child H *"I felt angry when he wouldn't let me join in the game"*
- Child E *"I tried to help child X when I saw that he was upset"*
- Child N *"I felt so happy when child O played with me"*

I felt that this was a positive development towards the children becoming more self-aware and understanding the feelings and concerns of others, as I discussed earlier in relation to Goleman's ideas.

Decide - Which is the best idea?

As time passed I felt that I was at last beginning to build relationships with many of the children and that they were beginning to respond more positively to learning. I began to notice that on days when it was not possible to have our circle time after lunch, the children were less settled and less productive in the afternoons. Interestingly I also noticed that after our class assemblies first thing on Wednesday mornings, the children seemed calmer and more focused and ready for literacy. I was excited to read that Katherine Weare thinks *"the development of spiritual values has strong parallels with work on emotional literacy,"* (p.11, *Developing the Emotionally Literate School, 2004*), because this view linked the afternoon circle time activities with my weekly class assembly. The usual format of these class assemblies is to sit in a circle, to light a candle and sing a song such as

"Shalom". The children then share something to pray for, for example something happy, sad or needy. I value each contribution and draw them together in a whole class prayer. I sensed that the children found these quiet prayer times immensely valuable, enabling them to feel in touch with one another and to show their love and care for one another as a class community. After the class assemblies I noticed that the children seemed to be very positive, more ready to learn, similar in fact to how they appeared to feel after the afternoon circle time.

I was excited to feel that my enquiry could include a consideration of the influence of both spiritual values and also the explicit teaching of emotional literacy on children's learning.

I felt able to link my Christian values alongside my teaching of emotional literacy within the whole school framework outlined in the school Mission Statement. I began to see that the children were responding to me in a much more positive way and this was confirmed by an exciting development within the class and the wider school community. Following consultation with his mother, I explained to the class about why the behaviour of the little boy with Tourettes (now to be referred to as child X) was different from theirs. I explained that each of us is special to God and different from one another and that X could not help some of his behaviour. I asked the children to help X by reinforcement of positive behaviour in front of him, by not laughing at his behaviour and by asking him to play on the playground, particularly if they saw him shouting at a little Reception child or doing something which might frighten a little one. The response to this was wonderful. In the

classroom the laughing at his behaviour stopped immediately and one boy in particular took it upon himself to line up next to X, "*so I can remind him how to be calm in the hall.*" When I was on playground duty, one of the other boys whose behaviour has not always been very kind, took on the role of keeping an eye on X to encourage him to play with him and not frighten the Reception children. This had a positive effect on X's behaviour and furthermore, I found out later that by allowing me to tell the class about his Tourette's, child X's mother had taken a significant step of trust herself.

In spite of the success outlined above, I still needed to continue to encourage all the children to be better learners and I thought that I had probably discovered the best way to do this - through stimulating, practical hands-on type teaching and learning which would appeal to the various learning styles of the children in my class. I established that some good learning could indeed take place in lessons like that, as for example in the following lessons:

- In Literacy, where the children had been reading, following and writing instructions. This allowed me to offer a range of practical activities including each child making their own sparkly star from pipe cleaners and also making orange paint from red and yellow. These activities provided good opportunities for independent work within a controlled environment and contextualized their resultant writing well. I was also able to differentiate the task to meet the needs of Year 1, Year 2 and the boy with Tourettes.

- In a whole class Numeracy lesson on measuring, during which all the children worked in pairs. The Year 2s measured class objects and furniture in metres and centimetres and the Year 1s found items which measured more than/less than a metre. The children remained on task throughout, were generally sensible with metre sticks and needed little encouragement to complete the task.
- In a whole class DT lesson following the design of a piece of playground equipment, the children were given a choice of materials to construct their model. I left them to work independently and was amazed to see that they remained focused on the task, fairly quiet and independent. Some children needed guidance and practical assistance but the lesson remained calm and happy throughout.

However, other lively lessons where the children were offered stimulating resources to support problem solving in Numeracy (with paper rockets and shiny stars) were less "successful" because of the behaviour of the boy with Tourettes. He became very loud and excited which disturbed the concentration and learning of the rest of the class too much to continue. I felt disappointed with myself for not having "got it right" and anxious about how I could offer fulfilling and appropriate learning experiences for X yet not let that affect or wipe out my influence on the learning of the rest of the class.

I realized that I was confusing my desire to cope with the more extreme behaviour of the boy with Tourette's syndrome with my desire to help the

rest of my class to reach their potential and I decided to go back to the basics of what I was trying to achieve in my class for **every** child, as outlined in the school Mission Statement. I needed a fresh approach and I turned to some of the very practical ideas of Belle Wallace, outlined in her book "Teaching Thinking Skills Across The Primary Curriculum" (2001). She advised:

"Perhaps we need to strengthen the ways we teach "learning how to learn" skills" (p.4)

I realized that this was missing from my teaching - could this help the learners in my class? I resolved to find suitable resources to help me teach the children how to become better learners.

While I was investigating resources to use, I began to see individual cases of academic improvement in my class which seemed to support my view that if I made a connection with a child and gave him positive encouragement he would begin to believe in his own abilities and good learning could take place. I identify with Katherine Weare's assertion that *"attachment is the basis for self-regard because unless we feel others care about us it is hard to care about ourselves. It is also the basis for success in learning"* (p.42 *Developing The Emotionally Literate School, 2004*). Appendix 2 details the case of a successful piece of work and improved attitude of a Year 2 boy, H, and supports this view (see Appendix 2).

Although I was feeling positive about a real improvement in my relationships with the children, in their relationships with one another and in the way that they were beginning to express their feelings and work through social and

emotional issues, I still did not feel that there was enough evidence of my influence on their learning. I needed to teach them how to be better learners.

Implement - Let's do it!

I was very excited therefore to find out about some new resources to teach Emotional Literacy explicitly which I immediately offered to pilot in my school. The SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) activity pack is part of the DFES "Excellence and Enjoyment" material. I started by using the photocard resources on my electronic whiteboard in the classroom.

These provided a stimulus for children to explore and develop their feelings vocabulary and in the first session I chose a photo showing a little girl with an excited expression on her face (see appendix, photo 1). The suggested questions which accompanied the photographs included;

- What do you think is happening?
- Have you ever been in a situation like this?
- What do you think the person is feeling like?
- Can you think of any other words to describe that feeling?
- If you felt like that, what would your face and body look like?
- If you are feeling like this how does your body feel on the inside?

I deliberately chose a photograph of a positive emotion first because I wanted the children to think about what it feels like to be happy at school. As Katherine Weare says, "*We need to encourage children to talk about*

what it is like to feel happy, so they learn to identify and keep the feeling",
(p.38, Developing the Emotionally Literate School)

When I asked the first question, a Yr 2 girl, O answered,

"she looks like she has had a happy surprise, perhaps her Mummy and Daddy have just told her she is going on holiday."

Other children thought that the little girl was happy because she was playing a fun game in the playground with her friends.

The children really enjoyed discussing the questions above and described the little girl as "happy" or "laughing". I had to introduce the word "excited" to describe her. They all agreed that you felt "nice" inside when you were happy and they were very willing to show me this feeling with their faces and bodies

Perhaps the most interesting part of this short lesson was when I asked the children why they thought I wanted them to learn more about feelings.

After a few puzzled looks, P said "so we can understand each other" which I felt was a perceptive response. I explained that I also wanted them to experience that happy, confident feeling when they were learning.

I have repeated the photocard sessions several times, using photos showing children who were concentrating, looking determined to achieve something, caring for another child and looking unhappy. I was excited to realise how quickly the children began to extend their descriptive vocabulary, particularly their use of adjectives and they were then able to transfer this skill to the rest of the curriculum, particularly in Literacy and History work.

For the first time I saw an exciting link between my explicit teaching of emotional literacy and an improvement in the children's learning.

As a next step, I decided to focus specifically on teaching the children about different ways of learning and the attributes that accompany successful learning. I chose to use the SEAL resources book "Going for Goals" and first of all read the children a story about a boy who had to overcome a huge obstacle to save his family. This story introduced the theme of setting, going for and reaching goals and was followed in another session by "Pammy's Story" in which Pammy learnt several things in the course of one day, each in a different way. The children quickly identified that Pammy learnt by:

- *Listening to her Grandad*
- *Seeing the expression on her mum's face*
- *Being shown how to skip by her friend*
- *Practising by doing it herself*

The following emotional literacy lesson was a crucial one. It was entitled "Miracle Learner" and in it I encouraged the children to imagine that one morning when they woke up they had become "Miracle Learners". We then discussed what a miracle learner might be able to do - "*Everything*" thought many children - and I explained that we were going to make a poster with three goals for the children to aim for, which would move them closer to being "Miracle Learners" (Appendix 3). We agreed on three attainable goals:

- *Settle quickly*
- *Keep concentrating, don't be distracted*

- *Be independent*

We also discussed what was meant by being independent and the children suggested what strategies would help them to achieve this (see poster in Appendix 3)

This poster was copied, laminated and prominently displayed in the classroom. I kept a copy at the front of the class and before every lesson I reminded the children what their goals were and encouraged them by telling them that they were becoming better learners every day. The improvements in learning and attitude across the curriculum were immediate. In the first Literacy lesson after I showed the class the poster, children remained focused as we engaged in hot seating the character of The King in the story of Puss in Boots, then participated well in shared writing of character profiles. I reminded the children of their goals a second time when they went to their tables to work independently and praised and encouraged them throughout the lesson. The plenary allowed us to review progress against our goals in addition to reviewing the learning in their writing.

Subsequently, I taught specific sessions about each strand of the "better learner" poster and began to see children taking responsibility for their own learning in a new way. In one session the children took part in role plays to consider how easily they could distract one another/be distracted by minor squabbles over rubbers, size of pencil etc. and all agreed that this sort of situation was distracting and prevented learning. The children themselves began to ask others to "*stop distracting me*" and group work in particular improved as a result. I continued to use the "better learner" poster

successfully across the curriculum, sometimes supplementing it with housepoints and stickers to reward particular efforts to meet the class goals.

Evaluate/Communicate - How well did I do/Let's tell someone!

After a week of using the "better learner" poster, I reviewed the children's progress towards the goals. Firstly I asked the children some silly questions, eg

- *"Did you do that fantastic piece of writing so well because the sun was shining?"*
- *"Did you build that great Lego vehicle because you were wearing your blue jumper?"*

The children laughed heartily at these questions but it moved them easily towards a meaningful review of how much they had developed their understanding of how to become better learners. When asked if they now felt more confident to try to learn something new, building on previous successes, most children agreed. However, one boy, T, seemingly confident and able, said *"I still feel scared sometimes when I try something new, in case I can't do it."* I told him about my fear of learning to ski, of not always finding it easy being a learner, but having to listen, to concentrate and then to practise it, again and again. This enabled most children to agree that you have to work hard to be a good learner but that following the steps on our "How to be a Better Learner" poster could help them on that journey.

I felt very encouraged by what the children had achieved in a short time. The SEAL pack seemed to offer a wealth of material to address social and

emotional issues and had a clear teaching programme to improve children's learning, motivation and understanding of the learning process too. I was excited to share the children's progress with behaviour support colleagues and my headteacher, with a view to introducing it throughout the whole school soon.

Learn from Experience - what have I learned?

The opening words in *Excellence and Enjoyment - A Strategy for Primary Schools (DfES 2004)* say:

"Helping children to develop as confident, enthusiastic and effective learners is a central purpose of primary education" (Introduction, p.1).

Through the process of this enquiry the children have begun to achieve that. I have strived to improve my professional practice and to influence the children's learning through the explicit teaching of emotional literacy and through my living educational values. I have been inspired by the children's response to so much new learning and I feel very fortunate to have been able to connect the values I hold with the reality I present to the children. In her book "Teaching Thinking Skills Across the Primary Curriculum" (2001), Belle Wallace says:

As educators we are already making a great effort to do a good job, but we can extend our professional practice even more, gradually and systematically, until we are professionals with excellence" p.21

When I started to write this enquiry, I hoped to be able to influence and improve the behaviour and attitude to learning of the more challenging children in my class. What I have learned is that an understanding of

emotional literacy has given me and **all** the children in my class a key to the door of learning. The early parts of this enquiry process addressed the children's behaviour, their understanding of themselves, their relationships with each other and with me. Our Circle time activities, positive behaviour encouragement with photographs, rewards/praise and subsequent raised self esteem prepared the children for the next step of learning how to be better learners. I have been so impressed with what I have seen so far that I intend to further develop my teaching and understanding of emotional literacy and its links with improvement in learning across the curriculum and I also hope to be able to support colleagues across the school as they introduce it in their classes.

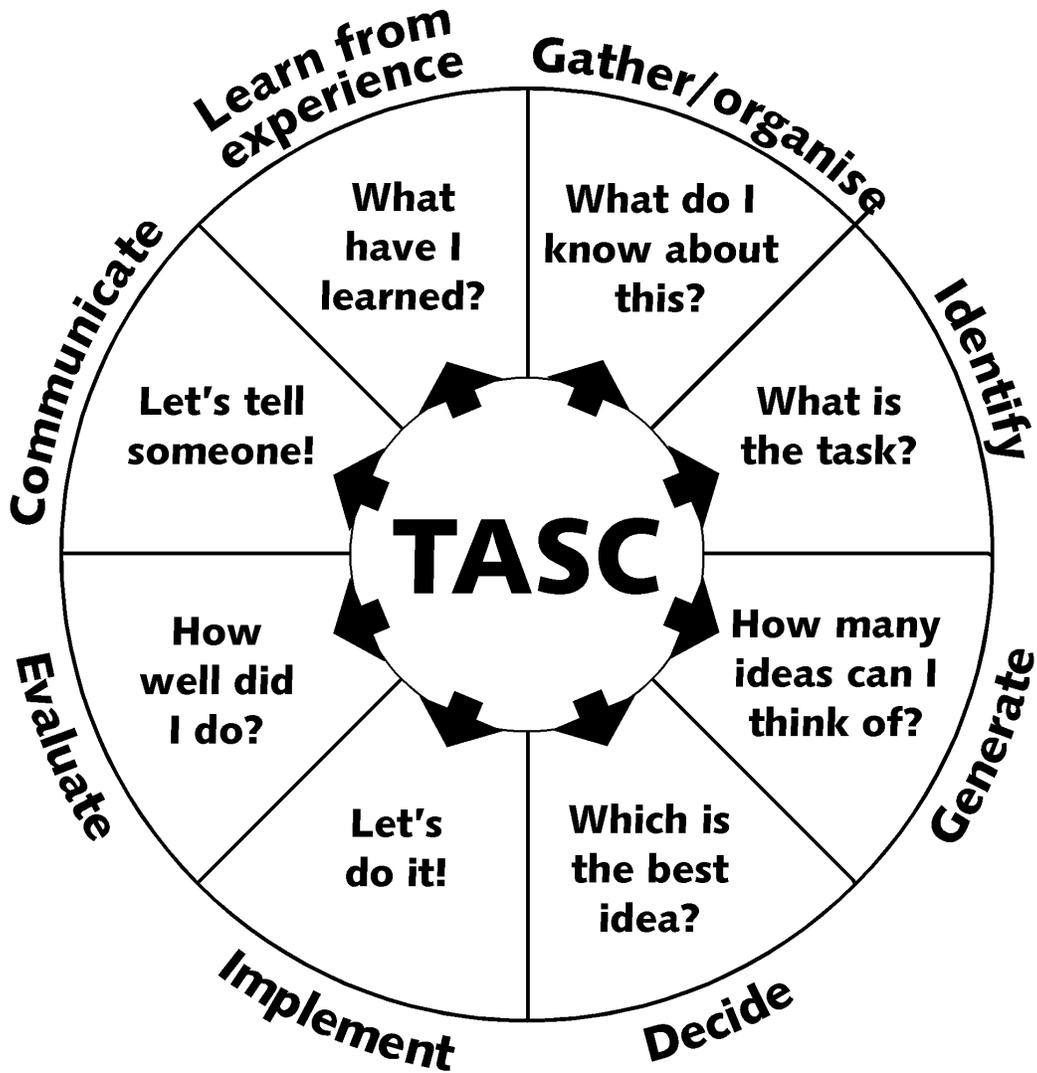
I will conclude my enquiry with the following appropriate quote, which I was excited to read in a paper written by Guy Claxton in which he includes this statement:

"When teachers encourage their students to talk more about the process of learning, their attitudes change and their achievements improve within a term." (Learning to learn: a key goal in a 21st century curriculum, p 1-2),
retrieved 05/02/06 <http://www.gca.org.uk/downloads/11469>

Appendix 1

TASC: Thinking Actively in a Social Context

The TASC Problem-solving Wheel



Belle Wallace 2000

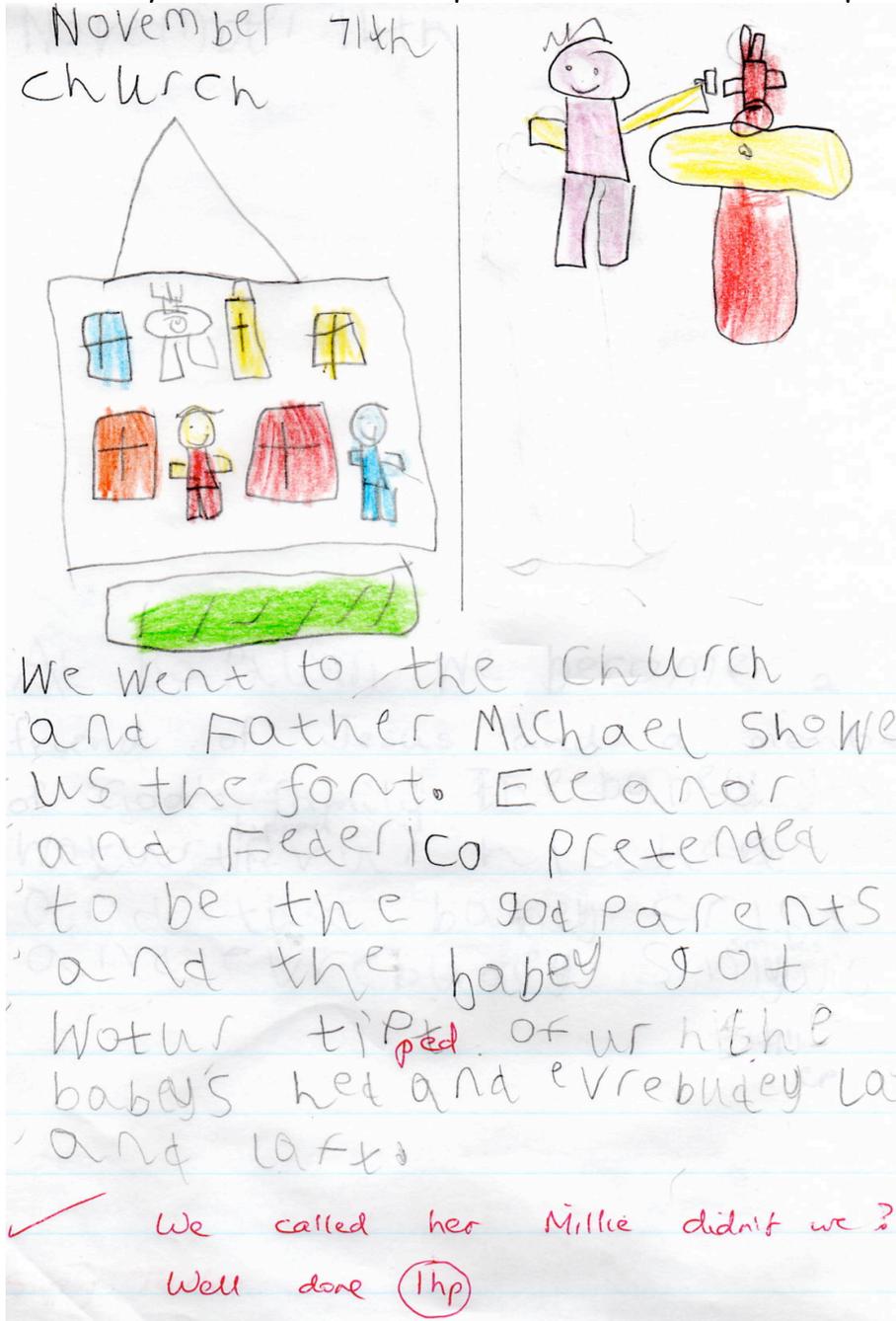
Appendix 2

H is a delightful boy in Year 2, caring and polite but a real dreamer. I have felt frustrated by his lack of progress in reading and writing and have spoken to his Mum about my concerns. Both his parents and I have encouraged him to try to concentrate more during whole class and individual work sessions. I was particularly pleased with the events of 17th November and the work that H produced independently in RE/Literacy. The reason I was so pleased was that it seemed that an action by me and a connection between H and me had triggered an unexpectedly strong response in H, which in turn led to good concentration and effort throughout the lesson, culminating in a much better than usual piece of writing by him. He then received more praise for his efforts and the reward of a housepoint. The sequence of events took place as follows:

- During morning Assembly I noticed H really listening to our Head and this reminded me that in the previous day's Christmas singing practice (led by me) I had also observed him willing me to notice him as he sat up really straight and tried hard to remember the words.
- When we returned to class after Assembly I made a point of praising H's behaviour and saying how pleased I was.
- During the whole class part of the RE/Literacy lesson as we discussed the previous day's visit to the Church as part of our work on Baptism, H was enthusiastic, putting his hand up more often than usual. I could tell that he was really concentrating and that he felt confident about what he wanted to say.
- H maintained his concentration when he went to his table to begin writing and remembered to use the word bank on his table to help some of his spelling without being reminded by me. I was able to praise his efforts when I went to see how his group was doing.
- When he completed his writing and read it aloud to me I was delighted with his efforts and so was he. I rewarded him with more praise plus a housepoint. Whilst it is only a short piece of work and he could have included much more detail, I feel that it represents a big step forward in his attitude and self belief. I am happy if I have had a small hand in this and I hope that we can now build on this together.

Later in the day, I took the opportunity to talk to H about why he felt proud of the piece of work and why he thought he had done so well in the lesson.

He found these questions difficult to answer but with further prompting, he said that "watching Father Michael in Church helped me remember what to write" and that "talking to O (his talking partner on the carpet) about what to write helped too." This is a reproduction of the work he produced.



How To Be A Better Learner

Our Goals

- Settle quickly to learning
- Keep concentrating - don't be distracted
- Be independent. If you get stuck
 - Talk it through with a friend
 - Use classroom displays
 - Remember what you did last time you were stuck
 - Remember! It's ok to get stuck sometimes!

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