Teaching and Learning in Primary Schools in Antigua and Barbuda

A Collaborative Research and Intervention Project:

Ministry of Education, Antigua and Barbuda, and

The Centre for Commonwealth Education, Cambridge, UK

CCE Report No. 7

Mike Younger, Patricia George and Molly Warrington, with Mary Cobbett

September 2011

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION TRUST

Teaching and Learning in Primary Schools in Antigua and Barbuda

Patricia George, *Planning Unit, Ministry of Education, Antigua and Barbuda*

Molly Warrington, Mike Younger, Mary Cobbett,

The Centre for Commonwealth Education, Cambridge, UK

Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The Centre for Commonwealth Education (CCE) is currently working closely with the government of Antigua and Barbuda on an initiative to raise the achievement of marginalised children in primary schools; whilst many of these children *are* boys, the research also focuses on girls, within an inclusive context. This project arose from a joint World Bank / Commonwealth Secretariat conference in Montego Bay, *Keeping Boys out of Risk* (May, 2009), at which the CCE was represented. This subsequently led to an *Awareness Raising Conference* in St John's, Antigua, in October 2009, which confirmed that the issue of 'boys at risk' or 'under-achieving boys' was high profile within the islands of Antigua and Barbuda. The Ministry of Education had devoted considerable thought and reflection to identifying the dimensions of achievement and under-achievement in Antigua and Barbuda (Collins, 2009), and a number of potential strategies had been formulated for 'taking boys out of risk' (Crump-Russell, 2009). At the same time, there was an emerging concern that socioeconomic status/poverty/social class was as closely related to achievement as was gender (George, 2009) and perhaps more so, and that such socioeconomic factors needed to be brought onto the stage as legitimate factors in discussing Caribbean students' achievement.

The outcome from the Antigua October conference was the agreement, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, to establish a pilot project (November 2009 – April 2010), exploring - through interviews with headteachers and senior staff - the essence of good practice in five higher achieving government primary schools in the country, and charting how and why the achievement profile in these schools had changed positively through time. It was subsequently agreed to focus the main research and intervention project on primary schools in Zone 1 of Antigua, where the lowest performing schools are located. Discussion prior to the Second Antigua Conference (held in May 2010) identified the nature of the intervention strategies to be developed in Zone 1 schools, and Cambridge based researchers, together with the Antiguan Research Officer, visited each of the schools before the conference. The May 2010 Conference was devoted to developing principals' and teachers' understandings of the intervention strategies to be implemented (shared reading / shared listening; interactive pedagogies in classrooms; listening to children's voices), and developing a framework for community of practice meetings.   These intervention strategies and research initiatives have been monitored and reviewed over the period September 2010 –

March, 2011), and this report summarises the evidence which was presented to principals and teachers at the third Antiguan conference in March 2011. The aim now is to disseminate the research and intervention strategies to some of the other smaller states in the Eastern Caribbean, and to launch stage 2 of the project (September 2011 – December 2012) in primary schools in the other three zones within Antigua and Barbuda, and in these other states.

The body of this first report refers to the outcomes of the initial research and intervention strategies, as perceived by local stakeholders and the Cambridge research team. A very effective research partnership has been established with local stakeholders, and we have been enormously fortunate to have had such strong support and guidance from the Director of Education and the Zone 1 Education Officer. Particularly, the research would not have been achieved without the wholehearted and enthusiastic contribution from Dr Patricia George, the Planning Officer within the Ministry of Education in Antigua, who has been an invaluable and indispensable regional leader of the project.

Intervention 1: Shared Reading – Shared Learning

Initial concerns over literacy

Interviews in February/March 2010 with five principals in 'achieving schools' across the different zones in Antigua, and subsequently with the principals of all Zone 1 schools, identified a concern with literacy, and particularly with pupils' achievements in reading. To some degree, in common with patterns in many countries, there was a gender component to these concerns, with girls tending to out-perform boys in Language Arts in the Caribbean Common Entrance examinations in all seven government schools in Zone 1. Some principals felt that some boys had something of a mental block stopping them from reading. Nevertheless, they also stressed that the issue could not be defined simply in gender terms, but in a more holistic context:

> 'One of the greatest problems that we have is the literacy level of the children – they
> are not reading, okay and a number of them cannot read at their grade level.'

Some of the principals recognised the need to go beyond the technical process of being able to read to improve comprehension, with some also appreciating the impact of reading on overall performance as well as on aspects of behaviour and self-esteem.

In response to these concerns, a number of reading interventions had been introduced in various schools. Programmes such as *Jolly Phonics* and *Hooked on Phonics,* the development of Reading Centres, booster classes for children with learning difficulties, reading clubs and the use of mentors were all mentioned. Such strategies were not always successful, however:

> 'Ah, the other day, we tried to implement a reading programme where the students were taken from the class … *but* they lost all the cards for the Hooked on Phonics programme and they gave so much trouble, after a time teachers said, look, this is not working. We're not gonna do it anymore'.

Crucially, though, as in other contexts where a number of strategies were employed concurrently to address issues of under-achievement, principals were unsure of the specific impact of particular strategies, and evaluations of the interventions were limited in scope.

Shared reading, shared learning: background and research evidence

Whilst children do, of course, need to grasp the technical aspects of reading, and become aware of, and use, strategies which help them to decode words, shared reading is an intervention strategy which attempts to move the focus from 'learning to read' (technical skills) to 'becoming a reader' (reading with understanding). The purpose of shared reading is to develop an enthusiasm for, and enjoyment of reading, which itself helps to generate greater engagement in school, and to develop what Wolfendale (1996) calls 'literacy for life'.

An interest in shared reading dates from the early 1980s, in the form of paired reading, peer tutoring and peer assisted learning. While these approaches vary in detail, they all imply the notion of children becoming each other's teachers, in the belief that learning encounters without an adult present can be especially important (Forman and Cazden, 1985). Based on Vygotsky's (1978) social interactionist view of cognitive development, with social interaction as the key through which learning takes place, the complementary relationships which develop between knowledgeable and less knowledgeable partners, between expert and less expert, are at the heart of peer tutoring (Foot and Howe, 1998). Peer tutoring may take place at any age and in any subject, but has perhaps most frequently been employed in the development of reading skills.

Shared reading is not simply 'anything that two people do together with a book' (Topping, 1998), but is a *structured* and well-organised approach. Within school, it takes the form of 'peer tutoring' in which children work in cooperative pairs, normally with a more able child

(the tutor) working with less able child (the tutee). Although, as Oxley and Topping (1990) point out, shared reading is a method sporadically in and out of fashion over the decades, it is now seen as a powerful educational tool.

Research shows that the benefits of a shared reading programme are two-fold. Firstly are improvements in reading:

- **Gains in reading age**: evaluating findings from ten projects undertaken throughout the 1980s, Topping (1990) found that on average tutees gained in reading age at 3.8 times 'normal' rates, while tutors gained 4.3 times. Reading age rarely fell back when a project ended, though it generally stopped accelerating. Among 34 Scottish schools undertaking shared reading, there were clear gains for tutors and tutees: out of tutees in 16 classes, nine showed gains in reading ability of statistical significance, six showed gains that were not statistically significant and one made normal progress. Among tutors in the same study, in seven classes gains were statistically significant, in eight gains were not statistically significant, and in another normal progress was made. This study found that least able tutees and least able tutors gained most. Similarly, in research undertaken in two groups of English schools, testing by teachers at the beginning and end of shared reading showed the rate in expected reading increased over the period more than would otherwise have been expected (Warrington and Younger, 2006).

- **Changes in attitudes and other improvements in reading**: in the Scottish study, almost all teachers observed a positive shift in the majority of children, particularly in relation to motivation for reading. Reviewing a large number of studies Topping and Lindsay (1992) showed other improvements in reading arising from shared reading, with greater confidence, fluency, use of context and likelihood of self-correction as well as fewer errors and better phonic skills. Rate or speed of reading also increased. Warrington and Younger (2006) founds that many boys taking part in shared reading felt their reading had improved, especially in relation to learning new vocabulary. At the end of the scheme the majority felt more positive about reading, and all realised the importance of learning to be a good reader. Teachers saw children benefiting in terms of increased competence as they had the opportunity to practise different characters, different voices and tones. Raising the profile of reading promoted enjoyment and even inspired some children to read more at home.

4

Secondly, research has showed social impacts. Greater levels of social competence were noted by Topping (2011), and have been evaluated more fully by Warrington and Younger (2006), who noted the following:

- **Sense of 'can do it'**: boys' fears about not being able to help their partners quickly disappeared as self-belief developed, a sense of responsibility for their partner's learning grew, and they enjoyed the status of expert. Teachers also noticed enhanced self-esteem among both tutors and tutees.

- **Developing social skills:** teachers saw improved social skills as a real strength of the scheme. Most children had had to deal with situations when partner did not want to read, or was not prepared to do what they asked. They also had to negotiate appropriate reading materials with their partners. Teachers also noted improved relationships in the playground.

Shared reading / shared learning in Antigua

Although many of the research studies on the effectiveness of shared reading are based in the United Kingdom or United States, shared reading has been undertaken in a range of situations, including children from disadvantaged backgrounds in contexts such as South African townships and Brazilian shanty-towns, where high rates of illiteracy, few books at home, lack of reading culture and lack of school and public libraries have restricted the development of high levels of literacy.

Within Antigua, Shared Reading / Shared Learning appeared to have potential as an intervention strategy because it:

- responds to the concerns of primary schools to improve attainment in reading, but also promotes enjoyment of reading and has wider social impacts;

- is a method proven by extensive research to be effective if well-organised;

- is appropriate in scale to the Antiguan context, being small-scale, short-term and relatively easy to set up and monitor;

- is appropriate in contexts where reading resources may be limited in scope.

In launching the intervention with participating teachers and principals in Zone 1 schools (May 2010), we stressed that its aim was not simply to help children to read better but to

become committed and enthusiastic readers. Its purpose was not to replace, but to complement professional teaching, through offering children more opportunity to practise their reading than was possible in a busy classroom, and to help them to consolidate their skills and become more fluent as readers.

The strategy

- Pupils are organised into cross-class pairs of Grade 3 (G3) and Grade 5 (G5) pupils, matched on the basis of ability (eg, an older less able child matched with a younger less able child).

- G5 children are trained by teachers in helping to select appropriate books, in correction procedures and in the importance of talk and praise. They are also given record and reminder sheets.

- Reading takes place in class time, with two twenty-minute sessions twice a week over a 6-week period.

- Teachers observe and monitor sessions, reviewing pairs in rotation, noting whether the choice of books is appropriate, the technique is being used correctly, relationships are working and pupils are on-task. Teachers' responses are noted down for later discussion.

Planning the research process in Antigua

Having presented the concept of Shared Reading / Shared Learning to a meeting of the Antiguan Research Team[1], and introduced the practicalities of the scheme to principals and teachers of the seven Zone 1 primary schools, an agreed research process was established to monitor and evaluate the intervention. In essence, this was planned to consist of the following stages:

- Schools to implement a pilot scheme in the autumn term, 2010: 6 G3/G5 pairs to follow the programme for a 6-week period.

- Spring term, 2011: programme to be extended to the rest of the class.

---

[1] Director of Education, all 4 Zone Primary Education Officers, Research Officer, representative teachers and principals from outside Zone 1

- Outcomes to be evaluated in terms of: (i) a brief questionnaire to all tutors and all tutees at end of the pilot and main programme; (ii) focus group interviews before and after the programme with pilot pupils; (iii) teachers interviewed at the end of scheme (iv) liaison with teachers over individual pupils' reading assessments to track progress, according to the method usually used in the school.

- An intra-zone meeting to be held with ART (Antiguan Research Team) and key shared reading teachers from each school, to allow cross-school sharing of experiences.

The ART agreed to support teachers in the implementation of the programme in each of the seven schools, clarifying uncertainties, advising on appropriate reading resources and - where necessary - negotiating time and space for the intervention with principals. In addition to this organisational role, the ART identified the need to act as critical friend to the teachers, challenging teachers and analysing what was happening in each school. This was seen as crucially important if the programme was to be developed and extended to other schools. Experience in the UK, for example, showed that the role of the key researcher, working alongside group of schools as a supportive outsider facilitating and challenging the group, was very important to the success of all initiatives.

Children's expectations of shared reading

Although there were inevitably some initial difficulties, the shared reading intervention was introduced in all seven government primary schools in Zone 1 across a two-term period. Pre-shared reading interviews with G5 students in all seven schools showed that the predominant feelings about participating in the scheme were those of happiness and excitement about the opportunity to do something new and different: 'I feel excited because I never been in this before, and I was very, very excited' (BG)[2]; 'I feel excited because I am going to feel as if I am a teacher and I never teach before'(BB). Some did feel nervous about participating in the scheme - 'my heart beats, beats hard' (GG), - such feelings being caused by a lack of confidence in their reading abilities and feeling it would be humiliating to make a mistake in

---

[2] Codes for quotes are as follows: B (Bolans), F (Five Islands), G (Greenbay), GG (Golden Grove), J (Jennings), O (Old Road), U (Urlings); followed by G (Girl) or B (Boy).

front of a younger child. However, in one case, nervousness was already combined with a growing sense of confidence:

> 'When I heard I was going to read to grade three, I got nervous because I was wondering, what if I made a mistake? Everybody is going to be laughing after me, but then I got confidence' (BG).

None of the children who expressed feelings of nervousness indicated that this meant that they did not want to be part of the scheme. In fact, as the quote above indicates, the children who were less secure in their reading abilities saw the scheme as a chance to grow in skill and confidence.

When asked why they thought they were chosen, many of the children made reference to their general academic ability: 'because I have talent, I am bright' (BB) and 'because I'm smart, so that's why' (GG). Others commented specifically on their reading ability: 'because I am the best reader in the class' (JB), while for others it was their love of reading that led them to be chosen. For some, it was their personalities and potential to be good teachers that seemed significant. For example, one girl said that 'when I was reading she told me I had good eye contact. I think she remembered that and now she chose me to take part in the reading scheme' (GGG). Girls were much more likely to refer to their personalities, character or behaviour as reasons for being chosen, whilst girls and boys were equally likely to comment on their reading skills and general academic ability. For a few children, almost all boys, being chosen came as a big surprise. These children struggled to articulate their reasons for feeling this way, which seemed to be linked to their perceptions of themselves as not among the best in the class. As 'being chosen' was regarded as something special, consequently, their classmates who were not chosen were often jealous. As one child said:

> 'I think that they are very jealous because they say that how the teacher can pick us and don't pick the others – I believe they're very jealous' (BG).

In that instance, the jealousy was perceived rather than necessarily actively demonstrated by their peers, but in other cases, their classmates' feelings were clearly acted upon. As one child said: 'just because they didn't get picked, they abusing people and hitting them' (JG).

Many of the children had high expectations about the outcomes of the shared reading scheme for their partners. Often expecting to see rapid improvements in their partners' reading, one child even asserted that 'in two days they will know how to read' (GB)! Children also made

reference to the broader impact they hoped the reading scheme would have on their partners' education and future opportunities, such as being able to get good quality jobs. A discourse of transformation was particularly striking in the statement of one girl who said:

> 'I hope that when they grow up they could teach other children and when the other children grow they teach other people so everybody will start over a new life and learn from their mistakes and understand better' (FG).

Here, it is not just the impact of reading that is viewed in a transformatory light, but also the act of helping which has this potential, due to its cyclical and continuous nature.

Their high expectations linked to their beliefs in their own abilities as the 'chosen group'. Consequently, there was a widespread belief that they had the right abilities and skills to help their partners. Some children made reference to the pedagogic strategies they would employ to ensure good outcomes. For example, 'I will tell her to break the word down into syllables' (JB), and 'when I am helping them to spell a word and they don't know it, I am going to give them a hint so they will' (OG). A few children also mentioned their interpersonal skills and how these would lead to a successful teacher-learner relationship:

> 'Once you start getting along with them, and once they know you won't like shout at them and be harsh, they will actually end up liking you and you get to help them to read better so you won't have any problems' (JG).

In this narrative, it was the quality of gentleness and the ability to build a relationship that were significant and led to good learning outcomes.

Linked to their expectations of positive outcomes, many of the children said they would feel intensely disappointed if they did not see changes in their partners' reading abilities. Feelings of disappointment were related to the effort they planned to put into the shared reading scheme and the time they were going to put in, which would be seen as wasted if their reading did not improve. A smaller number of children put emphasis on their partners: 'if they don't want to learn they don't learn, I cannot force them' (GGB), with some showing an awareness that people learn at different paces: 'I won't be disappointed because not everybody know everything – so some people will pick up quickly, some won't' (BG).

Although in general, the G5 children were looking forward to working with the G3 children and had high expectations of the scheme, they also expressed a plethora of concerns about the

potential bad behaviour of the younger children. Less frequently they showed concern about making a mistake or not knowing a word while reading with their partner.

Whether they would personally benefit from the scheme was a subject of debate amongst the children. A few felt they would not personally benefit since they already knew how to read, though the majority thought they would benefit in some way, either through improvements in their own reading skills or through the development of teaching skills. Some of the children, perhaps those with less confidence, felt that the learning process would be mutual:

> 'I think that it's good that we even teaching them so that they can learn better and we can learn from one another right ... we can know a word they might not know the word ... they can know a word and we wouldn't know it' (FG).

Outcomes of shared reading - pupils

An analysis of the outcomes of the shared reading scheme, based on **questionnaire returns** from 79 pairs of children (so 158 children in all) across all seven schools, suggested that the vast majority of pupils found most aspects of the scheme positive. In all, the seventy-nine paired returns indicated 711 individual question responses from year 3 tutees and 790 responses from year 5 tutors, (1501 responses in all); of these, only 89 individual questions brought forward a negative response, indicating that 94.1% of all responses were positive! 46 returns (58%) recorded positive responses to every question asked, suggesting particularly enjoyment in shared reading, enthusiasm for the shared reading initiative, increased confidence in reading and a desire to participate again in the future.

It was apparent from the questionnaire returns that the gender composition of the pair did not seem to affect the pupils' responses; returns from boy-girl pairs were not different from boy/boy or girl/girl pairs, nor was age a factor: older boy/ younger girl pairs seemed to interact as effectively as older girl / younger boy pairs. Where negative reactions were recorded, there were slightly more of these responses from tutees (24 comments) than from tutors (15 comments), although it was rare for tutors (2 instances) or tutees (6 instances) to record more than two negative responses. Only one pupil's return (from a male tutor) contained more negative responses than positive responses. There was little evidence of variations between schools, although we were aware that the nature of the sample was skewed towards 'good readers' at one school, which probably explained the very positive returns from that school.

Findings from the questionnaires were supplemented by discussion in the **focus groups**, where the majority of children, in both grades 3 and 5, expressed enthusiasm for the scheme, seeing it as enjoyable and beneficial to all involved. This enthusiasm is apparent in the following statements: 'I think we should do shared reading like, over the world and in different schools because it helps the children' (FG), and 'shared reading is a good thing to do, it could help other people' (GG). However, personal enjoyment of the scheme seemed to be contingent on being paired with a cooperative partner, with a minority of children claiming not to have enjoyed the scheme due to being paired with children who misbehaved and were uninterested. Even these children, however, seemed to feel positively about the overall idea, and could see the potential benefits of shared reading.

Despite their initial fears, many of the G5 children felt positively about their experiences of working with their G3 partner. For everyone, a feeling of being able to help their partner was an important aspect of what made the partnership a positive experience. Some children also clearly liked their partner on an interpersonal level, while for others, the mutuality of the relationship was important: 'the best thing is just having fun reading and sometimes when, when we don't know a word they help us, and when they don't know a word we help them' (FG). However, for some it was their maintenance of authority within the partnership that made it positive: 'Ahm I enjoyed it because when I talk to her she listens and she do what I say' (JG).

Most pupils thought that the G3 children had benefited from the scheme, particularly with respect to demonstrable improvements in reading skills, with many commenting on the changes they observed. Nevertheless a sizable proportion of children described difficulties they encountered with their partners related to poor behaviour and lack of interest in reading. Problems included not paying attention, claiming not to care about reading, disobeying the G5 child and not keeping still. Some of the pupils felt that although their partners misbehaved, they still did make some improvements. However, a minority of children felt that the misbehaviour and resistance to reading from their partner (mostly boys) was such that they did not feel that their partner had improved or benefited. Thus although G5 pupils were able to describe pedagogic strategies they employed to help their partners improve their reading, they seemed to have been much less able to cope with behavioural problems.

A sizable proportion of the children felt that participating in the scheme had also improved their own reading. One girl enthusiastically responded that she learnt 'to call big, big, big,

big, big, big, big words'! Some felt their reading improved because they had more opportunity to spend time reading, while others said that their G3 partner was actually able to help them directly: 'sometimes, when I read the book to her and I don't know the words she like corrects me with some of the words' (JG). Here it was the collaborative relationship between the two pupils that led to improvements. However, as they predicted in their pre-shared reading interviews, the children who were most confident in their reading abilities claimed that their reading skills had not improved. As one girl said, there was no improvement because 'I already knew how to read' (GG).

Another type of benefit was improvements in self confidence. Most often this was articulated in relation to improved confidence in reading, such as in the following comment: 'before I did shared reading, I used to read quiet, but I don't want nobody hear me, but now I can read, I can read with people and I'm not shy' (FG). Sometimes it was also the fact of being chosen for the scheme that led to an increasing sense of confidence. G5 children gained furthermore from the development of new skills and traits, particularly in relation to the development of teaching skills: 'I learnt how to take care of a student if I ever become a teacher' (JG).

These responses, from grade 5 children, were generally mirrored by their partners in grade 3. The majority of these partners enjoyed participating in the scheme and felt that their reading improved: 'Well, we have fun and … we read about the picture, and they ask us questions and we get spelling tests' (FG); the reciprocity of the scheme is also reiterated in grade 3 children's responses, with children commenting on their own ability to help their grade 5 partner with difficult words, and to develop more confidence and independence in their own learning: 'the best thing about shared reading is when the person doesn't know the word, you make them sound it out and they get the word right' (GG).

In one school, however, important issues were raised by grade 3 children which highlighted potential difficulties. Here, virtually all the grade 3 children reported that they did not enjoy the shared reading because of grade 5 partners who were either *unable* to help because of their own limited reading abilities or disinterested in participating because of their own lack of confidence as a reader: one grade 3 pupil reported that 'the worst thing (is) that every time she see a word that she can't spell, she skip over it' (AB)[3]; another commented 'every time I

---

[3] A = school identity protected

want to read, he don't want to read' (AB). On occasions, grade 3 pupils commented that their partners were overtly aggressive when they made mistakes; 'the boy (is) always shouting at me if I get one single word wrong' (AG); 'when me try read dey just, when me nah tell dem a word, dey just take out dem ruler and just pow, pow (AG). Significantly, perhaps, these complaints about grade five partners who could not read were most common in the school in which the teachers in their interviews described allowing the pupils to pick their partners randomly; in contrast, this kind of complaint did not seem to arise in the schools where pupils had been paired according to reading ability.

Outcomes of shared reading - teachers

In six of the seven schools, teachers completed a **questionnaire**, offering their perspectives of pupils' engagement and learning in shared reading (Table 1, overleaf). Overall, teachers perceived that pupils had responded positively to the initiative, with over 50% of pupils showing improvements in the amount of reading done (59%), their comprehension of that reading (56%), and their confidence to read (70%). Teachers also felt that many children's interest in reading had improved (69%), that they showed more concentration on the task (62%), and their self-esteem had risen (62%). Teachers felt that the initiative had less impact on pupils' fluency of reading (43% of pupils improved), the accuracy of their reading (48% of pupils improved) and the expression put into their reading (44% improved), but even here, almost half the pupils were judged by their teachers to have made real progress.

Teachers felt that the levels of improvement were most marked with grade 3 children: teachers judged at least 50% girls improved their reading on every criterion except for fluency of reading (47%); indeed, on all other criteria, the proportion of girls improving their performance ranged from 63% (accuracy, expression and behaviour) to 88% (confidence). Teachers' judgements of boys' improvements in performance were slightly lower, in that *only* 44% of boys were judged to have improved the fluency and expression of their reading (but this in itself was a significant improvement), but the improvements noted in interest (89%), confidence (78%) and self-esteem (74%) were noteworthy.

Table 1: Shared Reading, Shared Learning: Teachers' Perspectives of Pupils' Engagement and Improvement

Composite %	Amount reading done	Comprehension	Confidence	Interest	Accuracy	Fluency	Expression	Concentration	Behaviour	Self-esteem
G3, m	**67**/27/6	**60**/38/2	**78**/20/2	**89**/9/2	**53**/40/7	44/**56**/0	44/**53**/3	**69**/20/11	**62**/38/-	**74**/24/2
G3, f	**63**/37/0	**68**/29/3	**88**/12/0	**82**/18/0	**63**/37/0	47/**50**/3	**63**/37/0	**65**/26/9	**63**/37/0	**74**/26/0
G5, m	37/**50**/13	40/**47**/13	**47**/40/13	40/**47**/13	23/**70**/7	27/**66**/7	23/**70**/7	40/**53**/7	37/**60**/3	40/**53**/7
G5, f	**65**/28/7	**53**/37/10	**63**/30/7	**58**/35/7	**50**/40/10	**50**/40/10	**45**/45/10	**68**/32/0	**53**/45/2	**55**/43/2
Total of positive outcomes	**59%**	**56%**	**70%**	**69%**	48%	43%	44%	**62%**	**54%**	**62%**

Key:

7 / 2 / - : numbers indicate teachers' judgements about pupils' responses: first number = % pupils perceived to have improved and be more engaged; second number = % pupils showing no noticeable improvement / no change in pupil engagement; third number = teacher undecided.

G 3 / 5 = grade; m / f = gender of pupil.

This gender differential was more stark in <u>grade 5</u> (Table 1), with significantly more girls perceived to have benefitted from the initiative than boys. Thus whereas teachers' judged that at least 50% of girls improved on every criteria except expression (45% improvement), teachers' perspectives were that the *majority* of Grade 5 boys remained unaffected by the initiative. Nonetheless, even here, a significant minority (between 35% and 50%) *were* judged to have improved in terms of comprehension, confidence, interest, concentration, behaviour and self-esteem. Judged overall, this is a significant gain, despite the gender differential.

Interviews with individual teachers confirmed these holistic responses. One G5 teacher particularly emphasised that the largest improvements in confidence levels and reading abilities occurred amongst the lowest performing students: this highlights the value of enabling a range of children to take part in the scheme, rather than limiting it to those perceived as brightest. The list of positive outcomes looks impressive, and the teachers certainly did feel that shared reading had a role in contributing to these. In terms of behavioural issues, all the teachers reported that some of the pupils experienced problems in cooperating with each other. This was to be expected, at least initially, especially if one of the intended outcomes is to enhance the pupils' ability to work through conflicts. In some instances, conflicts between pupils were such that the pairings needed to be rearranged, but more commonly, pupils were reported to have made progress in their abilities to overcome differences and work together.

Having sufficient choice of books was an obvious practical issue that impacted on the viability and quality of the scheme. Choice was important, not only in terms of the difficulty level of different books, but also in terms of having a range of themes and styles to suit different tastes. Logistical issues were relevant in terms of the need for sufficient space for the pupils to read in, as having all the pairs sitting in one room speaking over each other reportedly led to chaos. This was also linked to the need for support from other teachers within the school to ensure good management and implementation of the scheme.

Shared reading: moving ahead

The interviews so far analysed, with both pupils and teachers, show that the shared reading scheme has, overall, been successful in its aim of generating greater enthusiasm for reading, and that in some instances it has led to improvements in reading. Findings also corroborate

evidence from previous studies which show that for success to be maximised, the following pre-conditions must be in place:

- The principal and teachers need to be convinced of the value of the scheme, to be clear about its purpose and to understand the process fully if it is to work well. The principal should give priority to arranging the timetable to facilitate the scheme, making resources available where possible (eg through encouraging the use of school libraries, inviting children to bring books from home if appropriate) and thinking about the creative use of space. In addition, the principal should have a high-profile role in supporting the teachers, and it is highly desirable that either the principal or a trained teacher should lead the scheme in each school. Parents should be informed about the purpose of the scheme to ensure their support.

- A pilot study involving 6 pairs of children is a good way to start, extending the scheme to the whole class in the following term. Choosing G5 children who lack self-confidence (rather than choosing the best readers) can be beneficial, since being chosen makes children feel special, and boosts their self-esteem.

- Shared reading should always be timetabled to take place in class time, ideally during Language Arts sessions, because children become resentful if they are required to participate during break times or popular lessons such as PE. The rest of the class can engage in reading at the same time, either together or on their own, in a DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) approach.

- Pairing is crucial: this should be done on the basis of ability, with good readers paired with good readers, and poor readers with poor readers. Ideally personality should also be taken into account, given the difficulties that can arise concerning behaviour. Unlike in previous studies, the sex of the pupils does not seem important in the Antiguan context, with mixed sex pairs working as well as single-sex ones.

- The training of pupils is important in explaining the ethos and purpose of the scheme, as well as giving them ideas and tools to employ while helping their partners. This seems to have gone well in all the schools, although not all schools remembered to distribute guidance sheets and report forms. The award of a certificate at the end of the process reinforces a sense of achievement.

- One of the negative aspects of the scheme for some G5 students was their difficulty in controlling behaviour, and it is therefore essential that a teacher monitors the reading

sessions, intervening where necessary, rearranging pairings if appropriate, checking the suitability of reading material and recording what is read, as well as ensuring pupils complete record sheets. Teachers should be encouraged to keep ongoing records during the scheme through the PMI (Pluses, Minuses, Ideas) feedback sheets.

- The range of accessible and appropriate books is crucial; several pupils commented, for example, that the scheme needed 'more interesting books' and that 'you needed to get rid of the easy books'.

- Shared reading works best if done over short periods, ideally of 6-8 weeks. This is long enough for partnerships to be established and for changes to occur, but not too long that children begin to lose interest. However, the programme should be repeated again in subsequent terms if it is to have maximum value.

- Evaluation is essential if the effectiveness of the shared reading initiative is to be monitored. In order to reduce bias insofar as this is possible, interviews should be undertaken by someone outside the school on a systematic basis. Record sheets should be kept by teachers and pupils, and consideration needs to be given as to how to assess individual pupils' reading progress within the context of base-line assessments.

Intervention 2: Identifying and highlighting existing good pedagogic practice within Zone 1 schools

Our interviews with Zone 1 principals in the early months of 2010 suggested that, although there were two schools where the development of new pedagogic strategies and classroom-based action research were on principals' agendas, the main focus of their work was on school management and on generating greater levels of community support and parental involvement within the school. A number of pedagogic intervention strategies *were* mentioned in these interviews, for example child-friendly schooling, Education for Democratic Citizenship, environmental work in the field, and each school had attempted to put into place some strategies to combat under-achievement, but there was little evidence that these had been sustained through time or evaluated in terms of their positive effects on learning and achievement:

'One member of staff was doing the Education for Democratic Citizenship initiative, but I think she had stopped because it was too much - having to do whatever she had to do at school and still carrying it'.

'We have started (child-friendly schooling), but it's not fully implemented, we're still working on getting on the materials together, so hopefully in the first two weeks of next term … we had so many things happening that not that it was shelved, it got sidelined'.

With two notable exceptions, where the principals talked in terms of collaborative leadership, whole school planning and regular staff development sessions where teachers together observe and critique model lessons, there was little sustained discussion of effective classroom-based strategies to improve teaching and learning. Yet paradoxically, our early discussions identified a number of teachers who were developing different approaches to learning, and several of the principals stressed the need for more interactive, engaging teaching:

'I'm pretty impressed with her (new teacher), she's innovative, lots of projects, lots of out-the-box kind of things, having the children's interest going, whereas the other teacher, she got very offended if I corrected her'.

'Sometimes I find the younger teachers, they're full of excitement and creativity and you know think they can make a difference, they can take on the world; sometimes I find they're more apt to trying new things, new ways of doing things. Teachers who have been around a while it's like, been there done that, it's not going to work: they have a more pessimistic attitude I find.'

A second thrust of the research, then, was to focus on existing good pedagogic practice within Zone 1 schools, to invite principals to identify in their own school a number of 'best practice' teachers who were willing to be observed on a regular basis. In this context, the research aimed to identify the essence of good pedagogic practice around interactive teaching, and to help teachers recognise the strengths of their own practice, and thus to contribute to the creation of strong self-esteem amongst this cadre of teachers. At the same time, the research focused on engaging principals and senior school staff in discussion about pedagogies which encourage and sustain learning, and subsequently on building and consolidating respect and trust within and across schools through discussion about productive pedagogies.

In developing this aspect of the research, we were alert to the fact that, as in many other contexts, classroom observations in Antigua were often conducted within an accountability framework, with Zone Education Officers tasked to assess the competences of teachers and to report back to principals and the Education Ministry on teachers' effectiveness. It was crucial that all participants - Education Officers, principals and participating teachers - recognised that the research-based classroom observations had a different function and purpose, and a different focus. Certain key principles were thus established by the Antiguan Research Team (ART):

- That the focus of the observations was **not** on evaluation and monitoring, in a judgemental way, but on identifying good practice which can be shared in a wider context.

- That outcomes would be discussed with teachers in ways which stressed the positive, in a context of critical friendship

- That outcomes would be anonymised, so that teachers would not be identified in subsequent discussions without their explicit permission.

- That there would be no negative feedback to school principals or other interested parties.

Planning the research

- Principals were invited to select a number of teachers in their school, depending on the size of the school, from grades 1-6; teachers should be good practitioners, with emphasis on interactive teaching; teachers chosen from different grades where possible.

- Each teacher would be observed once a fortnight, so over the half term, each teacher would be observed 3 times. A standard observation schedule would be used for the observations (Appendix 1).

- A record diary would be kept of the subsequent discussion by observer and observed: emphasis during discussion on strengths of the lesson, impact on students' learning, teachers' self-evaluation.

- Discussions with the each Principal would identify who would carry out the observations, and – if not a member of the ART (Antiguan Research Team) – the extent to which training would be needed[4].

- The ART would seek Principals' and teachers' permission to video one lesson taught by each of the teachers.

- In each school, a small discussion group to be established, led by Principals with participating teachers and (maximum of) 3 other teachers, to discuss the first sequence of lessons observed: tone to be supportive, acknowledging successes and failures without threat; external observer making record of the meeting.

The Progress of the Research

Although there was some initial reluctance on the part of some teachers to participate, the knowledge that they had been identified by their Principals on the basis of their perceived good classroom practice, and the constant reassurances from the local researcher that the emphasis of the observation would be on affirmation and support rather than on evaluation and monitoring, created a climate of collaboration and cooperation through this stage of the research. No teacher was compelled to participate, however, and in two schools, replacements were identified. Few teachers felt confident enough, however, to allow their lessons to be videoed, and the keeping of record diaries proved too onerous, and were replaced by a post-session interview between the observer and the teacher.

Nonetheless, most observations took place on schedule, due in no small measure to the persistence and efficiency of the Antiguan researcher, and pedagogic focussed discussion groups began to evolve in most schools. In the first phase, 68 lessons were observed, taught by 25 teachers, across grades K-6, most of which focused on the Language Arts area of the curriculum. Throughout each lesson, observations focused on teachers' activities and children's activities, on the structuring of the activities within the lesson, on the resources

---

[4] Although some schools initially expressed the desire to conduct the observations internally, with the Principal or another senior member of staff taking that role, in the event all observations were carried out by the Antiguan researcher, within the ART.

used and the organisation of the classroom, and on the interactions between teacher and pupils, and pupils and pupils.[5]

All observations schedules were analysed by the Cambridge research team, and a summary, Highlighting Good Practice in Zone 1 Schools, was drawn up for subsequent discussion with the ART.

Highlighting good pedagogic practice in Zone 1 Schools: Interim Summary, March 2011

At the March 2011 Conference, a presentation to the ART, Antiguan primary school principals and participating teachers from Zone 1 identified what the essence of high quality teaching might look like in Zone 1 schools. It needs to be stressed that this summary is an interim statement, needing further exploration, discussion and exemplification, but that it draws upon the experiences of teachers and principals working to develop quality learning experiences for children in schools where resources and technology are not always plentiful and assured. The summary identifies the art of the possible!

- **Classroom Environment**: In some classes, students' names are written on a card on their desks. The walls are covered with a variety of attractive and bright posters, many 'home-made'. There are also displays of students' work on the walls, showing achievement of individual pupils; as teachers agreed, this is a good motivating factor: "from the students' expressions and what they said when she pinned them on the wall, they were quite pleased with this".

- **Lesson Structure**: Many lessons are structured into clearly defined units, with a high impact introduction, which involves and draws upon pupils' experiences. Occasionally, however, there were examples where the introductory section of the lesson is too lengthy and too teacher dominated to retain and sustain most pupils' attention. Most lessons appear to have a plenary which enables teacher and children to recall what has been learnt. In some classes, this was done particularly well, with teachers being willing to pose quite open-ended questions: "What do you know now

---

[5] Appendix 2 shows two extracts, summarising the essence of the lessons: 'Being a detective' and 'If you give a mouse a cookie'.

which you didn't know 40 minutes ago? What did you enjoy in this lesson? What did you find difficult? What could I have done better to help you learn more?"

- **Teachers' questioning:** Teachers' questioning focuses not only on making sure pupils have understood procedural issues (i.e. what they are required to do) and testing understanding of text, but it also focuses on inviting children to speculate (what if? what do you think will happen next?), to infer from the text and to imagine other scenarios. This approach is motivational for many children and retains interest and engagement.

- **Allowing space and time for reflection:** Confident and enterprising teachers could hold the floor, manage the children and retain children's interests, whilst giving them time and opportunity to think and reflect about questions asked … this strategy values pupils' thoughtful answers, and encourages pupils to think. Some teachers made use of this idea of a thinking time for pupils.

- **Individualised and Collaborative Approaches**: In many lessons, children's learning seemed to progress more when *they* were given more scope to work in pairs or groups, to talk together about their learning and what the teacher was asking them to do, to be active and involved throughout, on a variety of different activities. Some classes were distinctively interactive, with the teacher managing to involve most students, at times specifically looking for students to answer who had not yet given one during the lesson.

- But **'Interactive teaching'** means different things to different teachers. Often, it is taken to mean whole class discussions led by the teacher, engaging children through tight and closed questioning, but with the teacher dominant, high profile and the focus of activity and attention for most of the lesson. This *can* work well, although it is challenging in such a scenario to make certain that *most* children are on-task and engaged, *most* of the time.

- **Pace and ethos of lessons**: Many teachers move lessons on, using a variety of tightly organised and time-limited activities. The very best practice seems to support but also to demand, to give a sense of urgency to the learning activity (for example: telling the children, "you have 7 minutes to do this; keep concentrating on it, and *we* can achieve more"; "let me see how quickly we can do this"). The '*we*' is important here, too,

giving a sense for collaboration and mutual engagement in the same task by teacher and children.

- **Cross-referencing to learning in other contexts helped to consolidate learning and engagement:** for example, one teacher's use of Venn diagrams to bring out the similarities and differences between two fruits prompted one student to recall that she had seen it before in her older sister's Maths book. This goes to the heart of not limiting students to what we may imagine to be their experiences, but to explore these experiences in making connections in lessons. In another lesson, the teacher made several connections – in a lesson on 'what happens to food when we eat?' - to work the children had done in previous Language Arts classes (e.g. expository writing), and made links with work in their Science class earlier in the day on how the stomach muscles worked.

- **The use of 'games', within groupwork contexts**, sustained interest and engagement, and opportunities 'to take a break', in the form of 30 second bursts of physical activity (in some schools called 'half-time' or some other sporting analogy), clearly helped to maintain attention and reduce tiredness. Sometimes these activities are concentrated in kindergarten or with younger classes, but there is evidence that they work well across the whole age range [e.g. a Bingo Pronouns lesson in Grade 4: observer notes: "….Bingo game: teacher reads sentences, children identify pronouns from text, mark them off on bingo card … students appear to be very attentive and quite eager to win"; "… students are quite excited and continue to want to play even though a number of them have won already. There is some excited chatter as in their groups students talk about whether they have BINGOed (PRONOUNed in this case) or not"; teacher offers encouragement / praise; throughout, recapping the sentences of the main activity at the end with students' participation served to reinforce the concept of pronouns"].

- **Role plays also have potential in this context**: in one class, a short (4 min) play / skit about an impending hurricane offered opportunity for collaborative student talk (about what they need to do to prepare for the storm, what foods to buy, and how they feel about the impending storm), and led on to the teacher building the children's responses into a wide-ranging concept map which then informed a short (15 mins) individual writing activity. The teacher offered continual positive reinforcement to the children at each stage, and drew on previous lessons to reinforce the

characteristics of high quality descriptive writing (e.g. that it should appeal to the senses).

- **Alternative seating plans for different parts of lesson**; several arrangements of the students during the lesson's time, from the initial whole-class session, to working in (pre-arranged) groups, to individual work which selected students then had to stand and present.

- **A realistic balance between praise and reprimand** was evident in many lessons (i.e. statements of praise were equal to, and often greater in number than, rebukes or reprimands given to children). In the lesson observations, classroom management issues rarely emerge as problematic, so teachers have opportunity to offer praise, reward and positive feedback. Praise can aid motivation, stimulate further engagement, show a valuing of the children's thinking and responses; in some classes, the use of *genuine* and *deserved* praise was very significant in supporting learning: observer notes … 'After students correctly give her the present tense verbs here, she tells the class that she is surprised at how well they are doing, they are really good … big smiles on various students' faces'.

- **Frequently, public praise is evident** (with class applause for individual's efforts encouraged and welcomed), but private praise, quiet and unobtrusively given, is not often recorded. This *may* be because it is less noticeable to a busy classroom observer, but it is important that it is offered, especially to some boys who may find public praise hard to accept and to reconcile with their image of self which they wish to project to their peers. So in some contexts, public praise only can demotivate *some* boys.

- **Lesson topics which stimulate and maintain interest:** a fictional bank robbery in St Johns as a starter activity for creative writing; hidden object in a box as a stimulation for Q-A on adjectives;

- **Opportunities for oracy**, offered to both boys and girls (gender sensitivity); children given space to explore their understanding and meaning with each other, in interactive groups, and to 'talk themselves into understanding'. Encouragement of pupil-pupil dialogue and interactions also supports learning, and moves the focus away from teacher: learning conversations do not always have to be controlled and mediated by the teacher; questions to the teacher can also be turned to the class for a response.

Crucially, this approach suggests a valuing of students' answers / knowledge base, and acknowledges that the teacher is not the only source of 'knowledge-authority' in the class, but that some students also rightly held knowledge about themes and issues; in this way, lessons recognise and build on students' existing knowledge base.

- **The use of informality and humour**: The observer notes, in the course of a word decoding / word recognition lesson with grade 6, that "there was laughter in this lesson, both on the part of the teacher and students, some of which emerged based on the teacher's comment about trying to catch out the students and the students trying not to be caught out. Thus, there was somewhat of a friendly competitive spirit between the teacher and the students which, in this context, appeared to engage the students in the content of the lesson".

Conversely, where children appeared to learn less effectively, lessons were more frequently very didactic and teacher-dominated, giving the children little space other than to respond to the closed questions asked, and little opportunity to explore their own learning.

- These intensive classroom observations have helped us to define a series of pedagogic issues which teachers need to consider in planning lessons which are most effective in supporting children's learning. They identify a series of strategies and procedures which are not heavily dependent on a resource-rich or technology-dominated classroom environment, (although both resources and technology indisputably support learning), but which are dependent upon teachers' imaginations, sense of vision and purpose and their commitment to children's learning.

What emerges from these lesson observations is that we need continually to revisit discussion about how learning takes place, to allow a greater awareness to develop – amongst teachers *and* children - about the need to balance different approaches to pedagogy, with more variety, activity and interaction, and an appreciation that students need to acquire different study skills for different contexts. We forget at our peril that pupils value most highly teachers who show confidence in them and are committed to their learning, who generate self-belief in the pupils they teach, and who convey a sense of sense of enthusiasm and involvement in the work planned for them. Learning is more likely to occur, too, when there is discussion about process (the 'how' of learning as well as the 'what' and 'why' of learning) as well as outcomes, an acknowledgement of variety, and a sense of trust in the teacher. There is always the need to try to generate a supportive classroom environment: which encourages all pupils

to be positive about their own achievements and those of others, whilst also considering how improvements might be made. A successful teacher regularly and explicitly celebrates pupils' *genuine* successes through praise and display (of pupils' work).

Intervention 3: A Concern with Listening to Pupils' Views about their Own Learning

Our previous research in the United Kingdom has recognised the value of collaboration with children as research participants. Davies (2005) suggested that a new respect for is evident within much educational research, recognising that on occasions pupils' perspectives are as / more informative than teachers' perspectives about the impact of schooling on behaviour and achievement (Wood, 2003). This view acknowledges that taking pupils' views into account leads to a much broader view of the complex, intersecting factors which contribute to under-achievement, and that pupils' views, taken together, have an authenticity which must not be ignored by educational researchers. In the RBA project in the United Kingdom, for example, focus group and individual interviews with pupils were a central aspect of data collection in every school, enabling pupils' voices to be heard on how the strategies impacted upon their learning and on their attitudes towards the learning process. This involved not simply using pupils for what they could tell us, but, through time, developing real relationships with those pupils (Warrington & Younger, 2006). In such a context, children are recognised as 'expert witnesses regarding … the conditions of learning at school, how regimes and relationships shape their sense of status as individuals and as members of the community, and, consequently, affect their sense of commitment to learning in school' (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000).

A further research initiative, therefore, involved developing situations and opportunities whereby researchers, and through them, teachers, could listen to the voices of children about their own schooling and learning, acknowledging the rich insights which children could offer us into their own experiences and perspectives, and identifying through them the factors which (de)motivate, (dis)engage and challenge them as learners. This aspect of the research process thus offered children opportunities to offer their own constructions of the reality in which they exist.

Planning the research

Aims

- To establish and identify children's views about learning and teaching, the elements of a positive lesson and what students feel helps them learn most effectively.

- To begin the process of building up a sense amongst children that they are active participants in learning and schooling, and that their views are valued and listened to.

- To impact upon teachers' thinking, so that they recognise that children have an authentic voice about their own learning, and might be one valuable partner in the establishment of communities of practice.

The principles to be reiterated:

To reassure pupils that:

- This is a genuine chance for them to participate in a dialogue about how they learn best;

- The school is really interested in their views about teaching and learning, and values what they have to say;

- Their views will be respected and taken seriously;

- They can be open about what they say but they must not be negative about individual teachers;

- The aim is to make the school (even) better and improve the children's learning.

At the same time, to reassure teachers that:

- Listening to children's voices is a widely-practised consultation process which offers valuable insights into the conditions of learning;

- It focuses on children's general perspectives and is not threatening or focusing on individual teachers; the interview guides can be shared with teachers to reassure;

- The process is anonymised.

The Progress of the Research

Over the period October 2010 – January 2011, single-sex focus group interviews were carried out in with 4-5 grade 6 pupils in each group, in all seven schools. In all but one school, the interviews were carried out by a local researcher who was known to the school and the children. The interviews followed the same semi-structured interview formats (see Appendix 3a/b) with pupils asked to consider issues such as conditions which support or hinder their learning, teaching strategies and teachers' behaviours which they welcome, likes and dislikes about classroom learning and school generally, issues which frustrate or annoy them in lessons, lessons they really look forward to. The interviewer sought the children's' permission to record the interviews, and reassured them that the transcripts would not be made available to anyone in the school.

Research Outcomes: Thematic analysis of pupils' focus group

Discussion within the students' focus groups stretched over a wide range of issues, but in this report, we have focused only on factors which support or hinder learning. Asked 'how do you learn best?', children frequently made references to the importance of interactive and oral learning. This involved several different methods and types of activity including: group work, whole class discussions, games and more informal opportunities to collaborate with peers. The reasons why these methods were thought to help with learning differed. Some children conveyed a view that interaction led dialogue and participation, generating new understandings and the creation of new knowledge:

> 'It is great when the whole class communicate with each other and it brings out what the teacher is trying to say and what other students in the class understand from what the teacher is saying' (OG).

> 'All students in class learn from one another, they also learn from teachers, what we have, what we've read, what we do and other stuff like that' (OB).

However, the benefits of interactive learning and group work were sometimes framed in slightly different terms:

> 'Well, the class does well when 'ah, when we do group work because the people in our class they don't work well by themselves, they like group work so that they can

depend on somebody to help them and mostly in the group work they don't do no work' (BG).

Thus, although group work was still seen as leading to overall good achievement at the whole class level, this was not always through an active process of generating new understandings through interaction; instead it was through a passive process of some students riding on the knowledge of other students in their group.

Games were a specific type of interactive activity to which many children referred. Games were described as being fun and motivating as well potentially beneficial to learning. But some pupils also expressed that: 'it is great when we play and some games have learning stuff (…), but not all games teach you something' (BB). This provides some confirmation of the efficacy of consulting pupils about their learning, illustrating that pupils are able to differentiate between what is just enjoyable and what is also educationally valuable.

The most frequently articulated strategies that help with learning were clear and patient explanations from the teacher and help when they failed to understand. In such a context, the teacher was viewed as the source of knowledge, but learning took place rather through the engagement of pupils in dialogue, having their questions answered and being encouraged and supported. For example:

> 'I learn best when I, when I am in my class and when I do my work the teacher will ask us if we don't understand and then she say she'll take time and... and, take time with us and help us with our work that we don't understand' (JB).

> 'Hmmm, like make you feel more comfortable, make you feel more confident that you can do it instead of just leaving you there to feel bad' (BG).

Here pupils were emphasising the importance of engagement between teacher and student to ensure that new understandings and learning takes place, drawing attention to the importance of individualized help and support. But there is also demonstrated here the connection between academic outcomes and emotional/social outcomes: that when children are encouraged and feel good about themselves they are more likely to have the confidence to do well.

Practical learning and getting to try things for themselves were also frequently articulated as things that helped with learning. Examples of practical learning usually came from science lessons where children had done experiments or gone outdoors to examine insects and plants,

but there were also references to different forms of active participation. For example, one child said: 'the best way I learn is when I go up in front of the board and do the work by myself, I understand it, when I go up in front of the board I understand the work more better' (OB) Here it is the act of getting to try it yourself, rather than merely being told how something is done, that leads to learning. Being given homework, as a means to practise what they had been told, was frequently mentioned as something that helped with learning.

While interaction was valued by many of the children, a smaller, but sizable number of children expressed that they learnt best by listening to the teacher and when the whole class listened to and obeyed the teacher. For example, one child stated that she learnt best when 'the teacher is talking and I listen (UG)' and another said 'I learn best when the teacher talk to us and we listen and don't get distracted by other people (FG)'. In part, references to the importance of listening to and obeying the teacher indicate a typical construction of teachers as the source of knowledge that must be received by the children. However, the statements also allude to the problem of student disruptive behaviour preventing learning and the need for a focussed and calm learning environment.

Gaining new knowledge was something that excited children about school. Sometimes it was the newness in general that excited the pupils such as the girl who said 'if it's a new topic then you get excited 'cause you're learning something new (FG)' and sometimes it was excitement about learning about particular things such as with the pupil who said 'I like when teacher teach us about vertebrates and invertebrates and endangered species because I just feel bad when animals are endangered' (GGG).

Receiving recognition and praise for their work also seemed to be important. One boy said he was happy when 'I get all my work right and the teacher compares everyone else to me'. (GB) This statement is in contrast to notions that boys do not like receiving public praise as it does not fit with maintenance of masculine identities. In some focus groups, the researcher specifically asked whether there were children in their classes that did not want high marks or who teased others for getting high marks, but the pupils responded that this was not the case. However, it is possible that the context of the focus-group was a safer space to articulate a desire to do well than the classroom. Additionally, the pupils chosen for the group may have been those with strong desires to perform well. Given the sometimes chaotic classroom environments that the pupils described, it seems likely that there are some peer groups in some of the classes for whom hard work and high performance are not desirable.

Fun, in the form of organised games and activities as well as jokes and lively interaction with their teachers were also described as positive things about school. Having fun at school seemed to be important for children's well being and it was also connected to learning. For example, 'the best thing in lessons is when we have, well we usually have a little, little game in lessons, just to help, just to help boost us up in the lesson (GB). Here, games were seen as enabling pupils to regain motivation and focus in lessons. Some children described their favourite thing in class a being when the teacher joked around with them. For example, one girl said the best thing was 'when teachers laugh and play with you and sometimes tell you jokes about what happened when they were younger and all that' (GG). This indicates that pupils wished to have more informal and less authoritarian relationships with their teachers.

Things that make learning difficult

The most commonly cited problem related to teaching methods was lack of help and explanation from the teacher. Often lack of explanation meant literally no oral explanation: 'when the teacher comes, she just writes the work on the blackboard and don't tell us what it is (JG)' and 'when the teacher don't explain it and just put it on the board and say 'finish it' (GG). On other occasions, children were referring to instances when the teacher did talk, but the focus was didactic, and the children could not ask questions, for example: 'when she talk and we don't get to, like, ask questions, she just talking (FB)'. At other times children referred to actual resistance from the teacher when they asked questions or tried to get more information:

> Interviewer: What are some of the things you wish teachers wouldn't do?
>
> B2: Stop ignoring us when we want to know more information about a subject.
>
> B3: And when you don't understand she don't answer us.
>
> B4: Stop for, 'um, sometimes when we ask them questions, they allowed to 'ah walk away.
>
> B1: They act like they didn't hear when you come. (BB)

The above dialogue paints a picture of the boys actively trying to ask questions and meeting resistance from their teachers who ignored them, walked away and refused to answer them. Problems related to lack of help and engagement from their teachers arose in all the schools and were mentioned by both girls and boys.

Most of the problems relating to teaching methods were linked to didactic pedagogies and lack of help and explanation. However, there are exceptions to this. A few girls in three of the schools mentioned <u>group work</u> as a teaching method that prevented learning. For them, the problems with group work included their perception that boys 'get girls to do all the work' (GGG) and that boys 'want to control everything, do nonsense on the paper and let you get less marks than what you're supposed to' (GG).

A different facet of this discussion related to the broader attitudes and behaviours of teachers, with them being absent or distracted from their teaching. Teacher absences often involved them going outside, going to meetings or taking calls on their mobile phones during lessons. All these types of absences prevented learning. Even if the teachers left work for the students while leaving the class, this was unlikely to be successful as 'people will just do anything when the teacher is not in the classroom' (OB). These absences were also frustrating and demotivating for the students, as one child expressed:

> 'I feel bored in lessons when we're doing my favourite subjects and the teacher come out of the class and don't come back till the end'.

> 'The children also reported incidences of the teachers being physically present but choosing not to give them work. For example, one boy reported feeling bored when: 'teacher doesn't give us anything to do she just make us put our heads on the table and lie down and shut our eyes' (BB).

Other problems stemmed from the use of corporal punishment and being shouted at or humiliated in class. This is significant, in that children's responses did not simply focus on corporal punishment:

> 'I wish teachers wouldn't, I wish that teachers wouldn't be so cruel shouting out on the children' (GB).

> 'I wish they wouldn't do shouting on us because I agree with (J) because when they shout at us, a lot of times, and then send us to the board to do something, our minds, like, my mind just go empty like I don't know what I'm doing and like sometime I just sit down and cry about it' (OB).

Here is a powerful example of how being shouted at can impact negatively both on the child's emotional well being and on their ability to learn and perform well academically, and

the subsequent distress caused. Fear impedes learning, and the subsequent response of this boy (*'sometime I just sit down and cry about it'*) is in sharp contrast to the tough stereotype of boyhood that is often used to justify harsh punishments and language. Inevitably, corporal punishment is a further dimension of this, with children commenting that they found it difficult to concentrate when they got beaten and also that they skipped school if they knew they were going to be beaten. But the use of humiliation has a wider impact than this, and can be counterproductive by reducing the degree to which students respect their teachers:

> 'Well, I don't like it when it is a good day, everybody's happy and so and then the teacher just start with a outburst that embarrasses someone and when the teacher does that it makes everybody feel like, well, she don't have no respect for us so why should we have respect for her. So I don't like it when the teacher outbursts and embarrasses us' (BG).

The behaviour of other students also emerged as a barrier to learning in all the schools. A picture was painted of classrooms sometimes as noisy and chaotic places where students ran around, shouted, ignored the teacher and threw things around the room. All these things constituted a barrier to learning for children who claimed that they wanted to listen to the teacher.

> 'Sometimes when you don't really understand and you don't concentrate it's not because of your fault sometimes, it is because the disruptive children, they're the ones who does make the noise and help to distract you. But some people if they really, really want to learn they will just forget about the distractions and study what the teacher is saying' (BG).

However, this girl also went on to suggest that if she let this disruption stop her learning she also partly to blame, and that she should try to persist despite the obstacles. Boys were particularly accused of causing disturbances:

> 'Like the boys mostly, they used to like to 'ah, they used to like to interrupt the class, they would disrespect her very terribly' (BG).

However, while the girls in most of the schools accused the boys of having the worst behaviour, boys sometimes felt that this was unfair and offered a different perspective, suggesting that the girls directed the blame at them whilst causing the disruption themselves:

I: Okay, now these children who are usually talking in class, is it usually the boys or usually the girls?

Various Bs: The girls.

I: The girls?

B: Yes, the girls, and when they're finish they love to blame on the boys.

I: Oh, it's true?

B: Yes (FB).

Research Outcomes: Student Council meetings[6]

A final aspect of the research involving children's voices saw the establishment of an Intra-Zone Student Council, enabling selected students (one boy and one girl) from the student focus groups in each school to come together to share perspectives. The main objective of the initial meeting was to hear from students their views on school, school improvement, and teaching and learning. The meeting was predicated on the idea that:

> young people are *observant*, are often capable of *analytic* and *constructive comment*, and usually respond well to the *responsibility, seriously entrusted to them*, of helping to identify aspects of schooling that get in the way of their learning. (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace, cited in Boaler, 2000, p4)

Students had raised a number of significant issues in their school-based focus group interviews, and were invited to elaborate on them at the Student Council meeting. They were also given the opportunity to talk about what makes a good teacher, their responsibilities in being a student, and what they considered to be their parents' responsibilities in helping them with their own schooling.

At any initial meeting, discussion is bound to be tentative and cautious, as participants get to know each other and adjust to context, particularly when engaging in a new experience. Any analysis of students' reactions must be tentative and circumspect, therefore. Nonetheless, students had very clear ideas about the characteristics of a good teacher as one who 'listens to

---

[6] The discussion which follows is based on one meeting only, and preliminary analysis of the transcripts of that meeting.

students at all times in class', 'is patient', 'helps students to work together' and 'helps you if you don't understand certain work' by going 'into the details of the lesson and topic'. There was general agreement that 'a teacher should not be judgmental' and 'will always give you second chances'. Much of this emerged from the students' own experiences of positive role models whom they had encountered in their own schooling, but there were also perceptively critical comments about teachers' responsiveness and willingness to listen …

> 'Teachers need to listen more …Like if, for an example, there are two boys talking in the class and then they will complain to the teacher that somebody hit them then teacher would say that if it's not important don't say nothing … they don't listen because sometimes when they go through a lesson and they don't go clearly and then someone says "I don't understand" they would like say hush and they don't want to hear what you say.. . When the teacher does a lesson and sometimes it's very hard to understand, sometimes it's very hard to understand and when we ask her to break it down, and we ask her to break it down easy so that we can understand she tells us "what do you mean you don't understand it? I made it so simple", and when sometimes it's so hard'.

… and on occasions about teachers' professional behaviour …

> 'Not to have phone on in class … The teacher stops the lesson and answers the phone. If students can't have their phones at school, teachers should not have theirs at school; I believe they should turn off phones during class times'.

Interestingly, none of the students mentioned the gender of the teacher, and on prompting, there was a clear consensus that this was irrelevant, and that it was competence, ability to teach and maintain an ordered classroom environment for learning, and willingness to listen to students, which were the crucial factors in making a good teacher.

Students also offered lucid insights on how their own learning might improve or be improved. It was clear that students were able and willing to take considerable responsibility for their own learning:

> 'Well we can be more willing to work. We can be attentive and obedient which will make the teachers more wanting to help and so.'

> 'Study to the best of your abilities and take responsible for your actions so that you can just be something better as you grow up in life.'

'If I don't understand I word I will go on the internet and find what it is.'

'Stuff that I'm doing to improve my knowledge for the exam is like cutting out my play time, cutting out my TV time, cutting out all the time that I take for free time and putting all those time to school work and studying.'

Equally, however, they had a clear view of how teachers and principals might improve the quality of the education offered by the school: in part, this involved 'offering extra classes' or 'early and late classes', but there were also references to teachers' classroom pedagogy: 'teachers should have more pictures and charts for the lesson', and teachers should 'make the lesson more interesting … make a game according to the lesson that she's teaching … instead of just talking and writing', and to their style of teaching: 'I think the teachers must be more patient with the students'. As to principals, there should be 'less banging and less beating', 'the principal should help the teacher by having after-class', there should be a willingness to 'open more groups like reading and maths groups in the weak areas that the students have so they can learn more'.

Parents, too, were seen as having a role to play in offering practical help with learning, by 'putting you down and looking over in your book and seeing what you got wrong and help you to study it over':

'Well, my parents, they already do lots of stuff like check my book at night, the notes that I get during the day at school they go over it and determine to what I do in school I get rewards and stuff like that. So my parents they help me, go through each test with me and stuff like that.'

Equally, parents should supervise at home, to 'make sure you have homework', 'by buying the books you need', by telling 'us the rewards that we can get so that we can be more up to date'.

A Pedagogic Overview: drawing together issues from interventions 2 and 3

The intersections between classroom observations of 'good pedagogic practice' and children's own perspectives of what supported and hindered their learning show a significant coincidence. Both aspects of the research evidence identify a number of crucial factors which are seen to characterise effective teaching and support children's learning:

- A clear and sharp beginning to lessons, within a coherent structure which is clearly explained to the class; the 'point' of doing an activity is always explained; a 'route map' for the lesson supports learning and shows the children that the activity is worthwhile and purposeful.

- Pace and variety: Teacher-pupil interactions are fast in pace and energetic in style, with the teacher's input high profile, offering a variety of activities and public / private praise; a disengaged teacher is seen an ineffective one, giving the wrong messages about the value of learning and what (s)he is offering the children.

- High levels of teacher input in introducing the topic are essential, but children need space for activity, exploration and talk, to 'talk themselves into understanding'; sometimes teachers' input can be too didactic and too much teacher-talk takes place. Children view this as counter-productive.

- The use of a proactive and assertive approach, which does not become negative or confrontational.

- Constant reinforcement of high expectations of all children, regardless of gender, home background and social class, ethnicity or island of origin.

- Children welcome the establishment of absolute 'base line' rules which, when broken, incur known and consistent sanctions; indeed, consistency of teacher expectations is the watchword.

- Short term targets, with several different activities taking place within each lesson, to tight and agreed time limits; so activity and variety support learning.

- The use of public praise when the teacher knows that this can be received and acknowledged by individuals; but private praise can be easier for some students to accept.

- The use of humour, informality and discussion of topics with which the students identify (fashion, sport, music, technology), to consolidate rapport.

A Holistic Perspective: Establishing Communities of Practice

Initial interviews (February – March 2010) with principals in the highest achieving primary school in each zone in the island, and subsequent interviews with all principals in Zone 1

primary schools, suggested that most principals saw their prime role as being concerned with administration and the environment and upkeep of the school and the welfare of pupils; this included a concern with individual pupils' well-being and with parent-community liaison. Thus, for the principal of one school:

> 'I am also here to make sure that the plant is in a condition that they … it's comfortable to work in, the teachers don't get disgruntled over, so the atmosphere of the school is not depressing, you know, …I strive to make the school seem like a home away from home, let the children feel comfortable, they can come, come and talk to the teachers if they have concerns and the teachers also can come and express their concerns.'

Another head spoke of her responsibility to the Ministry:

> 'To guide and manage the school, curriculum, carry out the policies of the Ministry of Education and to make sure the children get their course of work … to manage the school plant as well as assisting in the completion of the curriculum, helping the teachers.'

Occasionally, principals would teach, but this as the exception rather than common practice:

> 'I supervise staff and also the students, cleaners too, and the entire compound in general, to supervise the entire plant, report to the Ministry, carry out Ministry policies … and collaborate with parents and stakeholders of the school. Occasionally, I teach, if I have to... if a teacher is absent and nobody is there to assist I have to take the class.'

Although principals expressed concerns about the quality of some teachers, particularly with a significant minority of untrained teachers, and the (lack of) motivation which *some* teachers showed, there was little evidence that principals in reality placed a high priority on monitoring the quality of classroom teaching. Although one principal spoke at length about:

> 'Ensuring children achieve at their highest level and in order to do that I have to 'ah ensure the teachers have developed the skills that are necessary in order for them to do that',

there was still a reluctance to accept that the principal should provide a role model in effective teaching:

'Well I suppose when they see you work … they tend to make comparisons but as I have said to them – I can't do things like every body else, I can only do it like me …so don't expect me … to be like others.'

Indeed throughout these interviews, in total with 10 primary school principals ((30% of the total in the two islands), there was far less discussion about school leadership and pedagogy, and most principals did not teach on a regular basis. One principal did mention action research, as part of the requirements for a Master's degree, but that apart, only one explicitly mentioned 'being the instructional leader, being well, the role model, setting an example … making sure children, their learning …is top on my agenda'.

Equally, in only one school was significant importance given explicitly to motivating the teachers and offering leadership:

'When I try to do things, it's to encourage the teachers. We have, 'ah, I try to validate them, so we have appreciation for the teachers also. At the end of term you may find I may take, send them for lunch, they go to a restaurant for lunch, they may go to a hotel for a day, yes, so, we raise funds so the school can send them to relax, 'cause they need, … so that they'll want to come to work',

or whole school planning …

'Ah, well, what we do, we plan together, … if in a particular class the majority of the children seem to fail, we look, we get together and we say, look, what is happening here, let us look at what is happening, and let's see ways … what can we do and to improve, so for instance you may find the teachers for that class, they, what they do, they take turns, they shorten the children's lunch break or shorten their break, shorten anytime, if they come early they go in with them and try and, you know, 'ah, look at some of the areas that the children are weak in',

or collaborative leadership and partnership with staff …

'Basically, any strategy that I've come up with, is with the input of the teachers. Yes, they have an input because I am of the opinion I can't run the school alone, so everybody, when I have my staff meeting, I say, teachers, what do you think, what you think can be done, what, you know, collaboration, and they are the ones who come up because I find that when they come up with it, 'ah, they take on ownership of getting it

achieved, so, that's how I work down here, teachers take ownership of what is to be done'.

These interviews with principals suggested that – on the whole – a concern with leadership for learning, whether of teachers or pupils – was a relatively deficit area within the national context of Antigua and Barbuda, and that establishing a whole school ethos with a focus on leadership, pedagogy and achievement might be a further crucial element in the project.

Within the Antiguan context, then, it was agreed in effect that one aspect of the project would involve a focus on leadership at different levels, involving not only primary school principals but teachers who had been involved in the school-based initiatives on shared reading / shared learning and on classroom observations of good practice, and key players in the Antiguan Ministry of Education. Partnerships at different levels were seen as essential: partnerships at the school level between involving the school principal, teachers, parents / carers and pupils; partnerships at the Zone level between the Zone Education Officer, the principals and key teachers, and the ART; partnerships between schools and with researchers and the UK research team from the CCE. Central to this aspect of the project was the commitment to give principals and teachers opportunities to talk together and separately with each other and share ideas about education and about teaching and learning. It was acknowledged that this would be an ongoing and regular activity aimed and teachers' professional development and ultimately, school improvement, predicated on the idea that…

> 'School improvement is most surely and thoroughly achieved when teachers engage in *frequent*, *continuous* and increasingly *concrete talk* about teaching practices... capable of distinguishing one practice and it's virtue from another'. (Judith Warren Little, *Education Researcher*)

These *communities of practice* are thus seen as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do *and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly*. Participants develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice.

The role of the Antiguan based lead researcher was crucial in establishing these communities of practice, taking the organisational lead, setting up meetings, ringing up people and reminding them of deadlines, and taking the administrative burden from teachers who were already busy in schools, Indeed, the role of the Antiguan Research team (ART), and the explicit support from the Zone Education Officer and the Chief Education Officer, were

absolutely crucial in facilitating and supporting the project. Together they brought a detailed knowledge of the schools concerned, of the educational priorities in the country, of the strategic alliances necessary to initiate and sustain the project. But the role of the local researcher was absolutely fundamental, linking with the Cambridge team, providing data, context and cultural background, and continually liaising with all Zone 1 schools to ensure time scales were met, and to be a constant source of encouragement and support to participants.

The Research Process in progress

Communities of practice developed at two levels: in the first instance at the individual school level, where participating teachers, other teachers, the principal and a member of the ART met to discuss teaching and learning, the essence of good practice and the progress of the paired reading / paired reading intervention. Subsequently, community of practice meetings began to be held at the Zone level with the Zone Education Officer, the local researcher, school principals and participating teachers[7]. Although this initiative is only in its early stages, analysis of evidence from these meetings suggests that a number of common threads, which relate both to substance and to process, are beginning to emerge.

Substantive issues

Teachers were keen to discuss issues associated with the research and the strategic interventions they had implemented. Thus, for example, one CoP meeting reflected in detail on the mechanics of the shared reading initiative:

> T1: I think in some instances, instead of guiding the Grade 3 child, so … so that they can attack the word, sometimes the Grade 5 child would tell the word to the Grade 3 child.

> T2: Before each lesson we go through … the outline that we received in terms of the different strategies especially with the five finger, the one with the five finger and all o' that. To try to go through how they, they encourage the pupils at different intervals,

---

[7] Still to be established is the school level, with parents / carers being invited to participate in creating a memory bank of quality teachers / teaching.)

like while they reading saying 'good job' and so … and so I guess it's just a reminder…

T3: Yes, I was saying the same thing, I always encourage them remember don't just tell them the … help them … let, let them fight with the word, break it up in syllables etc, which my set … they were really doing.

and were keen to identify and evaluate the factors which contributed to its success, as this dialogue interchange illustrates: :

TU: I think that students were more comfortable when reading with their peers ... than with the teacher as well.

TFI: Yes, I was just gonna say that as well, being with their peers … you know sometimes as teachers … we are a little hard on the children, but being with their peers … they were very supportive of each other especially the older ones. So I saw the Grade 3 children, more comfortable, more at ease, and I think that was one of the things that, sort of helped you know … helped them to improve.

TGG: I found the children, they were more generous with their praise … good job, great job, thumbs up, you're doing well … and they get all excited and motivated when they got it out.

T2FI: And to add to that too, for umm the Grade 3 students, they … their self confidence was, was boosted they were confident in actually reading to the class, actually taking up a book, sounding out words, their … their overall confidence was heightened.

T2/GG: Another thing I noted about the programme, is that it gave us teachers a chance for evaluation, and it is something that we don't often do … you know sometimes we would set a … you know we would assess and we would do whatever we're doing but there is no chance for evaluation, how well did we do or what, what can I do to change the pattern. Let's say for three weeks we notice this in the children, we stop and you know, check and so on, so it gave a chance for evaluation and also gave us consistency because you had to … to you know, do it for a certain amount of time which is something that I think helped.

Later, this CoP meeting embraced a range of linked issues and 'pet peeves': vigorous debates emerged among teachers concerned about how they should respond to the children's use of

dialect in the classroom, and how to reconcile official Ministry policy - that standard English is to be encouraged and promoted in schools and conversely dialect actively discouraged – with the fact that many children, especially in rural contexts, enter primary schools speaking dialect as their first, home-based language. Equally, discussion focused on the various strategies being developed by schools and individual teachers to engage parents in reading partnerships with their children, and the need to stimulate children through different activities so that they have experiences which they *want* to write about.

A general consensus emerged from another CoP meeting that each lesson should be 'a lesson of reading', and the notion of peer tutoring / peer support for learning was identified as highly desirable. Most teachers recognised the value of using strategies to build up confidence and self-assurance of the children, such as inviting them to present their work to others on the board, to show their own understanding and to help clarify potential misunderstandings. The use of concept mapping and mind mapping was also seen as a positive teaching strategy, enabling children to organise their thoughts, to share ideas collaboratively and to think tangentially around a topic. Discussion also focused on the positive value of group work and of open questioning, engaging children in debate and discussion, and structuring questions and enquiry in such a way as to stimulate thought and open up investigation, rather than closing down lines of thought.

In all the community of practice meetings, however, teachers expressed different views on children's responses to public praise. Most agreed that there were few gender differences in the acceptance of public praise by with younger children, although one teacher spoke of a boy who seems 'uncomfortable when he gets praise. You know the girls will be all, you know, pumped up and carrying on, but this particular child, he would hang his head down and sit down as if he's in a shell, he's very reserved' (TGB). Overall, however, teachers felt that younger boys enjoyed receiving praise as much as the girls, and that at Kindergarten / Junior school, it was not an issue: 'we never look at the gender, sex at this stage' (TGG). In the case of older students, however, teachers offered a more ambivalent response, with praise seen as 'not really mattering to them' whilst 'the girls go looking for it, more so than the boys.' (TGB). In some schools, boys were seen as acknowledging praise in an ironic way, adopting a macho, low key, almost unconcerned public face: '… sometimes they might clap, they might clap on the desk, they might say 'big up man', they tell their friends … but remember they're trying to be cool now…', whereas elsewhere it was noted that boys commented negatively or sarcastically when praise was offered to another boy:

'Yeah, the thing about it is, if you praise the boys in the class, it's like another boy, you will find another boy commenting… they don't do it to other girls. They do it to the boys alone. Another boy would comment in a demeaning way on the praise of another boy' (TGG).

Image, role and performance were seen as key concerns for older boys, with some (but not all) teachers commenting on their embarrassment when praised, their need to be seen by their peers as *not* performing well academically:

TiFI: It can, it can demotivate. They don't want to be seen as doing well with their friends…

TiiFI: Maybe in the upper grades… their macho-ness to upkeep, so I praise you, hello…

TiiiFI: When you say they're doing well, they don't want to seem as if they're not cool and so…

TivFI: Me nar find it so, maybe secondary school, yeah.

TiFI: You have a child in a class who is always not performing, he's not performing, and then you say, what, [Boy name] you did well, he feels embarrassed when the whole class goes [claps], Teacher say he get 95, that leads to embarrassment, perhaps, yes, something like that.

TiiFI: Exactly. They say, what, [Boy Name] did well, uh uh, you're embarrassing the man.

TiiiFI: But when she came around and say, (Peter) I'm so proud of you, maybe he'll appreciate it, but hear the difference… Then you can even say to him personally, (Peter), I'm so proud of you, yes, but then when you do it openly he may feel funny about it because it's giving the impression, because you know children are all going to react, and they're going to say, uh uh, Peter finally, a so e go, and that kind of thing, so…

TiFI: Because he say, this is no big deal, that's what he's saying.

TivFI: But boys, you have to be careful with them.

TiFI: That's not a problem we have in Kindergarten. To me, when you big them up, even say they're, and you tell them, make them feel so good about it.

TivFI: When they get older, their psyche changes and you have to be careful.

But other teachers disagreed, suggesting in one school (J) that boys in grade 6 were equally open and receptive to public praise as the girls, and in another school (U), there was general agreement that boys love praise and respond well to it, but

'if they don't win they don't want to applaud the others... I pick up just a little envy, just a little, you know, but to me, they love the praise, when another group wins, they will just... hardly do anything'.

Significantly, perhaps, at one school, the under-achieving boys debate seemed to have entered the *boys'* own consciousness:

TkUr: "When we were having Prayers in Kindergarten and Grade 1, well, I told the boys, don't let the girls outshine them, and they said, no teacher, girls always on top... it's just amazing that they're saying that. How they so small and thinking that already?

Tg5Ur: But they would have heard if they listen to television, every time they bring over the Common Entrance results, and they say, again the girls have, on the News they say, and you hear it constantly too so you might...

TkUr: So I encourage them and tell them, let the boys, be on top for this year, you know, and then they were like, yeah, yeah, yeah".

The process of developing Communities of Practice

The second major concern emerging from community of practice meetings related to the very development of community of practices *in practice*. At one level, it was quite clear that the teachers present were supportive of the concept of collaborative working and learning from each other, but felt that there were a number of barriers to be overcome before this became a reality. Some teachers felt they needed to have a good working relationship with colleagues, based not just on professional status but on personal friendship, before they could exchange ideas and discuss teaching. Conversely, there was a fear that offering comment or feedback would endanger friendship or personal rapport with other teachers. Others acknowledged the need to develop trust in colleagues, and the confidence that any relationship would not be abused or misused. This focuses attention again on the purpose of lesson observations and mutual collaboration. Many accepted that teachers, as practitioners of their craft, held expert

knowledge of a range of effective teaching strategies which enabled them to get concepts across to their students, and acknowledged that that these ideas should be shared, as there was great potential for teachers to learn from each other. But whilst there was a general willingness amongst the teachers present to accept advice and comment from others, and to offer support in a non-critical, non-threatening way:

> 'I love to communicate, I love to socialize, so if you come and tell me … so and so and so, and (I) can say to you I'm not going to get upset with you, if I do, I would tell you right out to my face, so I think that we should all, talk … we should be helping each other.'

in some exchanges, there was a fear of criticism…

> 'We are all humans and we come with all our individual differences and I would feel offended if someone come and say, 'ah you've made a mistake there' … others might get offended.'

and of being 'reported on', either formally to a senior figure within or beyond the school, or informally, on the school 'gossip network'. There was also considerable unease and suspicion as to how this would develop in practice ('some teachers see the negative side of any positive thing they observe or hear about'), and how personal friendships and professional relationships would survive in such a context.

A further issue revolved around how far teachers should be prepared to share and disseminate their own good practice:

> 'Yes, there is another part of it, you know, some persons are just selfish, now if I found out this incredible way for students to learn, understand and learn their tables and the Principal come in and say, well, good job Miss Joshua, me say, me kip 'um all fo meself [I'll keep it all to myself], I'm getting all the praise instead of going to the rest of the school or we have a little Community of Practice whatever and you talking and say, well I found out a way you could do it with your students, a big part of it is that some persons are just selfish. So you have to overcome your personal issues before you can get the Community of Practice'.

The general tenor of the discussion on communities of practice suggested that at one level supportive dialogue and collaborative exchange of ideas was somewhat under-developed in the schools represented, and that a significant change of culture would be needed, shifting the

focus from accountability, inspection and judgement to enabling support to develop for professional development within a climate of mutual respect and critical friendship, if such communities of practice are to become realistic and sustainable. Whilst working in small groups was seen as one way of facilitating this, it was recognised that the strength of individual personalities should not be downplayed, otherwise 'individuality takes over'.

A specific challenge to be faced in creating Communities of Practice, then, relates to the need to generate discussion which take place in a context of mutual trust and shared confidence. Some teachers talked of being undermined by others, in a 'points scoring' context, with comments which undermined or threatened the teachers' own sense of professionalism and self-esteem:

> TU: I remember this teacher said no, anytime this teacher says anything to her, she's not listening to her because she knows she has an agenda, she has a hidden agenda behind, and that's why you see we have to be, I guess sensitive in how we approach, yeah...

This can be a challenge even in the most carefully constructed and supportive school environment, as exemplified in this extended extract, concerning reading difficulties experienced by children as they move up the school: *(authors' italics to highlight specific comments)*

> T1: They cannot sort out the sight words.

> T various: No, it's not sight words.

> T1: You could have written words from one end of the blackboard to the other end and leave it and say break down that and they could have done that, just break them down and…

> T2: *No, nuh nuh nuh, listen to me*, that set of children she have in … dem min totally different… they were bad with their sounding out words.

> T3: You all are fighting about the sight words, but *you all are missing the bigger picture*.

> T4: *But you're telling us there that out of your 23 students, only seven students can do that?*

> T5: Me a tell you that some of them can't read, that what me a try fo say.

T6: *So, you see (principal), that's the problem now that we're faced with, that the children reach up to us and…*

T5: They can't read.

T6: … apart from not being able to, 'ahm, when we talk about being able to recognise basic words for some of them, comprehending now, Principal, is a problem …because now they recognise these sight words and what, but when it comes to explaining what they're doing, they cannot comprehend and it's a problem up there. So then now, calling words is just half of it. So if you're not able to understand and comprehend what you're reading.

T7: Children are having problems with comprehension, children are having problems comprehending what they read because of the code, because of lack of previous knowledge, because they don't have the concept as well as the words, the vocabulary are unknown to them, so that means for us as teachers, we then need to teach comprehension skills.

T5: Yeah. And we try, we need to tap into different skills in which to reach them to get them to comprehend, because unless they come with previous knowledge, they can't understand what's on the paper. Unless they know the vocabulary, they can't understand what they're reading. Unless they understand the concept, so we need to go back and start to teach skills and strategies for comprehending, because until we do that we gonna have the problem all along, because I can recognise the words, I can read and not know one thing that I'm saying because my comprehension skills are not appraised. That's the problems we're having.

T2: *Tell me why, tell me why, don't tell me the obvious then. Anything I read, you're going to have to come straight out and tell me.*

T6: Principal, for me, honestly, we're going to need to go into that Grade 2, do some testing and see where (the problem begins).

This energetic and vigorous discussion has an underlying tension at times, with disagreements over the nature of the learning difficulties which some children have experienced, and the implicit suggestion in the responses of some teachers that *other* teachers in the earlier years might not be preparing the children adequately. This is a rapid-fire exchange, with some teachers talking over others, other teachers demanding to be heard, with

the penultimate response, of teacher 2, highlighting a sense of frustration and exasperation. There are encouraging elements in this discussion, however: the sense of passion and commitment to the children, the willingness to be honest and open, the careful analysis by some of the teachers of the issues involved, the frankness of some of the interchanges. All of these illustrate a school which has developed an environment where open and frank exchanges about learning and teaching can take place, but even here there remain issues about valuing the contributions of all teachers, generating respect for all contributors, and chairing, generating and sustaining discussions within non-judgemental frameworks.

This extract also illustrates in some detail that in some schools, consideration had been given to building collaborative support for less experienced or untrained teachers:

T1: We have mentors, like mentor program, we have the seniors teachers mentor us, doesn't really have to be untrained but somebody if you don't remember something or you don't know something you can go to that teacher individually and you can ask how you do so and so and she would help you with whatever, so it's like pick on a mentor.

T2: We don't talk about it, I mean, what happens, if I'm wrong and she tells me that I'm wrong, then…

T1: Well, it's still nothing to go and tell the Principal, if Ms. Joshua no know how fu do so and so, it's just between you and, nothing secretive but the fact you have somebody you can confide in, well I don't understand how to do so and so and she will help you.

T3: You know with our school per se, if one teacher don't understand it's either the other teacher help or all the teachers help.

T1: You see everybody come in and say, so how you do so and so?

T2: I remembered one teacher came to me to ask me something, I couldn't understand and I went to Miss J, she couldn't know how to do it, we had to go another teacher and she was talking about it with another one so it was like five of us trying to figure out the right way to get this thing done, and by time you finish you not knowing in the beginning you know now, you know the right way for when it comes up again you know how to go about it.

Within this school, a more formal mentoring programme enabled discussion of practice to take place in a non-threatening context, with a level of confidentiality which suggests that staff development is the central concern; the collaboration highlighted in the last comment points to a public airing of a difficulty, and a meeting of minds to resolve the issue to benefit pupils' learning.

Whilst this degree of formality appeared to be unusual, there was evidence that some teachers did have some experience of group support and reciprocal working, with both workshops and schools closing early for staff development sessions and in-house training being mentioned:

> T1: Every Friday we would have this little workshop like I mean we would, yeah…

> T2: And that was so good … I only started talking to her [indicates one of the other teachers from school present] since I came down to the Juniors,

> T3: So basically you only talk to me because you can get information?

> (laughter)

> T4: Noooo.

> T1: Okay, as I was saying about the workshops … maybe one Tuesday in the month we will have all the teachers of this particular class….and we watch a lesson and then afterwards we say…we criticize the lesson positively.

> T2: The Principal must reinforce that we are going to look for the positives of how we can do this, and we will improve because when people criticize they look for the worst, they try to bring out the worst, but I think we're supposed to go out and look for the good, and if we do have these kinds of practices, in-house training, go to each other class, watch a lesson, say all of us go and watch a lesson in Grade 5, and you know, when you finish, watch it and see how it is in the classroom and afterwards now we don't discuss it here but we take it back to the office, the staffroom and we have a general discussion and you know we can improve from thereon and whatever, and I think we'll have smooth sail and that's the best Community of Practice we'll have here.

It was acknowledged by several teachers that it would not be easy to generate supportive and open discussions, 'because you know sometimes, you know we have some difficult persons to work with', and some teachers did not like to receive criticism on their demonstration lessons, and were unable to deal with it:

'We'd have a lesson where we teach the teachers and then we have a paper where you judge them on the lesson and you'd have to comment,… if you don't take it., or if you take it hard, that means you have a problem with taking criticisms and I don't think that's a professional view because criticism is everywhere especially in teaching… even if I am a person that don't like criticism I have to go up there and do it and I have to take the criticism that one day you will be able to take it'.

Despite the general unease about the difficulties of generating communities of practice in practice, then, there was significant support for the idea in theory, and evidence that some significant steps were being taken, in some schools, to develop the idea in practice. Where these initiatives were being developed, a number of issues emerged, linked in a wider context to the role of the school principal:

- To place the emphasis on mutuality of support and identifying good practice, rather than on a judgemental approach (despite the use of 'to judge' in the quote above)

- The need for the senior leadership in the school to be proactive and positive: 'the leaders would say that at this school this is how we *are* going to do things, not just say this is what we *have* to do'… to stress 'this is the environment that we want to create at *our* school … we're not doing it for ourselves ...it's going to benefit the students'…

- The need for the leader to have a clear vision of the school, articulated to all teachers and parents / carers, which she insists upon, and which is based upon learning rather than on administration … who says 'I want my teachers to build themselves up'.

- The need for the leader to empathise, to show humanity, to establish good relationships based on humour and respect.

In the words of a group of teachers:

I would like to insist on the vision thing, to expound on the vision, I think too that a good leader of any school plant has to be tolerant for one, the leader has to have respect, not only for his immediate subordinates, but for the teachers on a whole, not only the teachers, even the cleaners…

Various: The whole staff, yeah.

> … the leader has to deal with so many different personalities... has to deal with so many actions and reaction and so the leader then has to be tolerant and fair, 'ah the leader have to be forthright as well. If the top is slack, the bottom can't be tight!

The research on establishing communities of practice in Zone 1 schools is –in some respects - in its in its infancy. Only a limited number of meetings have been held to date, it has not always been possible to ensure that the same teachers have attended, and there are issues of trust and confidence, hierarchy and purpose still to work through. Nonetheless, the evidence from some schools suggest that there is a spirit and a will to ensure that teachers have the opportunity to meet to discuss tangible issues in a supportive and non-judgemental context, and teachers' responses from the intra-zone CoP meetings suggest that there is an appetitive and a desire to sustain and develop these meetings into the future.

Final Words

It is appropriate to conclude with some caveats: the research upon which this report is based took place over a limited time period, in seven government primary schools in Antigua. We do not, therefore, make any claims about the generalisability of our findings, although there is a synergy between the outcomes reported here and those in other research studies. We are aware, too, that the intervention strategies need to be tested in other contexts, over a longer period of time, and that we need to explore more rigorously the impact of these interventions on children's achievement. There are issues, too, of sustainability and continuity within the current schools to be considered, and of the transferability of the intervention strategies to other contexts within and beyond Antigua and Barbuda. Nonetheless, the responses within these schools, and in the Caribbean dissemination conferences at which we have presented these findings, suggest that there is potential in these strategies which merit further exploration and evaluation. If we are to maximise the achievements of both boys and girls, increase their engagement in schooling, and enable them to see schooling as a worthwhile process, then we must continue to explore avenues such as these, and to engage both teachers and students in all aspects of the discussions.

Appendix 1: Classroom Observation Schedule 1

Theme / topic of lesson		No. in class: Boys Girls	Grade:	Time lesson begins:	Time lesson ends:	Date:
Time	Teacher activity	Children's' activity / engagement in lesson				

Observations can be made in each row in the table, either on a regular basis (e.g. each 5 minutes) or when the activity changes or a noteworthy event occurs.

Appendix 2: Lesson Exemplars

A Grade 5 Lesson on 'Comprehension': 9b / 9g

- Lesson structured around 'detective' theme; theme immediately engages children.

- Teacher reads story to children, engages children in subsequent oral Q-A to analyse main thrust of story; children required to interpret and make inferences from story, to show understanding. High level of active engagement from children.

- Repeats activity, with different story, but children to give written answers; children work collaboratively and quietly in groupwork as 'detective firms'.

- Very participatory style; children interact vigorously within group, arguing / talking through questions.

- Considerable enjoyment and participation by pupils *and* teacher. Teacher concludes lesson by telling class that they were answering inferential questions in that the answers were not just sitting there.

- Teacher willing to accept that the students were right and importantly that she was (and so could be) wrong, and also allowed the students to express their pleasure at being right without reprimand [a strength of lesson].

- Strong use of thinking time for students. Teacher acknowledged that she wanted to raise their ability to think and to think beyond what might be explicitly before them.

- Teacher worried about time management, that perhaps she spent too much time on the first sections before giving them the one to do by themselves – but this was all relative. I think enough time was spent (and probably needed to be) so that students could clearly understand what it was she was asking them to do, and they generally did a good job of looking beyond the print to infer answers to the questions asked.

- I also noted that the lesson's introduction was good, as it perked the students' interest, and also as they ran with the idea of being detectives looking for clues throughout the lesson.

- The Teacher also worried in the after-talk about how she had arranged the groups. She noted that she should not have grouped 4 boys together, as all-boy groups tended to not work as well as if at least one girl was present. Additionally, she said she should not have grouped just those 2 girls together (seemingly one of the girls was weaker than the rest of the class), so that it may have disadvantaged the other girl. Additionally, in one of the groups with 2 boys and 2 girls, she said that she should not have grouped those 2 boys together as they were both quite strong-willed and so could over-power the contributions of other group members. This does raise the issue of how students are placed into groups, and a Teacher's knowledge of students' strengths and weaknesses. The worryings, though, point to the teacher's intricate knowledge of her students and how they work – itself a strength.

A Grade 2 Comprehension lesson : 9 b / 13 g

- Big Book story read to class: 'If you give a mouse a cookie' … "Reads the story to the class. While doing so, shows pages and pictures to the class, and makes various comments or asks questions of the class during its reading. Some of these questions asked students why, others asked students to predict what they thought would happen next. When more than one student speaks, says 'Okay, lets listen to _____' naming particular students … Students offer various answers, having to rationalise their answers in the context of the story and based on their experiences. Generally they are very eager to participate in this". 10 mins activity.

- Summarises story on flowchart on board, eliciting children's responses all the time.

- Tells students that they will work with a partner near where they are sitting. They are to make up their own little story. Writes on the board: 'If you give a mouse a _____ he'll want a _____ to go with it.' Tells class they are to think about this with their partner and to fill in the blanks with their own words. Gives each pair of students a paper with the sentence and a drawing of a mouse. Tells them they are not to use any of the words on the board.

- Walks about and looks at students' work.

- Calls class together. Groups are to present their work to the class. Eventually calls all the groups to the front. Lets class applaud after each. First group, boy and girl read together: 'If you give a mouse a needle he'll want a thread to go with it.'; *second group*, boy + girl read together: chips/ juice; *third group*, 2 girls read together: bread/ cheese; *next group*, 2 girls read together: scissors/ haircut; *next group*, 2 girls, 1 girl reads: cupcake/ glass of water; *next group*, 2 girls read together: pot/ spoon; *next group*, boy and girl read together: brush/ comb; *next group*, 2 boys read together: corn flakes/ milk; *next group*, boy and girl, boy reads: cupcake/ juice with straw; *next group*, 2 boys read together: cupcake/ milk; *next group*, boy and girl read together: bread and cheese/ juice.

- Lesson illustrates how interesting content can grip students' attention; generating children's dialogue about the story clarifies comprehension and any misunderstandings the children may have, and also offers them some opportunity for extended talk. The lesson embodied a number of positive characteristics: active engagement; variety of activities, challenge, valuing of children's active involvement, fast-moving.

Appendix 3a

Interview guide I: for use with focus groups of pupils to discuss learning and teaching.

It is suggested that this Interview Schedule be used for the first set of interviews. The following questions are intended to provide a guide, so that members of the Research Team are following the same broad format, but there is scope to reframe the questions and to ask supplementary ones, as appropriate.

Impress upon the children that:

This is a chance for them to have a say about what a good lesson looks like / what helps them to learn.

The school is really interested in their views about teaching and learning, and values what they have to say.

They can be open about what they say but they must not be negative about individual teachers.

The aim is to make the school (even) better and improve the children's learning.

In lessons …

- I learn best when …

- I find learning difficult when …

- I wish teachers would …

- I wish teachers wouldn't …

- It is great when / It would be great if …

- I don't like it when …

- The best thing is …

Statements can be used which also explore pupils' feelings …

- I feel really pleased with myself in lessons when …

- I feel bored in lessons when …

- I don't want to be in school on days when …

- I feel frustrated or annoyed in lessons when …

- What I really look forward to in lessons is when …

- I feel the whole class does well when …

Appendix 3b

Interview guide 2 for use with focus groups of pupils to discuss learning and teaching.

It is suggested that this Interview Schedule be used for the second set of interviews The following questions are intended to provide a guide, so that members of the Research Team are following the same broad format, but there is scope to reframe the questions and to ask supplementary ones, as appropriate.

Part 1 explores pupils' views on school and their own achievement

- Do you like school?

- What do you like doing best at school? [Ask about subjects if they don't talk about them, look for non-stereotypical responses and question them.] Is there anything you don't like? Why?

- Do you think it's important to do well at school? Why (not)?

- Do you think you do well at school?

- Do you think you work as hard as you can at the moment?

Part 2 explores pupils' views on their own achievement and their own learning

- What sorts of things happen in a really interesting lesson?

- What helps you to learn then?

- Is there anything that stops you from learning or gets in the way of learning?

- Is there something you could do yourself to help you to do your work better?

Part 3 focuses on school support

- What would you like more of in lessons?

- What would you like less of in lessons?

- Is there something the school could do to help you improve?

- Do you think the teachers care about how well you do?

- Do you think you get lots of praise and encouragement?

- Do you think the teachers do anything particularly to help boys (or girls)?

- What happens if you don't do your work properly?

Part 4 explores pupils' views on gender

- Do girls do better than boys in this school? Or do boys do better than girls? Or both the same? [If one sex or the other, ask why.]

- Are there some things boys are better at than girls; some things girls are better at?

- Do girls work harder than boys, or the other way round, or the same? [If one sex or the other, explore further.] Do the teachers treat boys and girls the same?

References

Collins, P.M. (2009) The nature and Dimensions of Achievement and underachievement in Antigua and Barbuda (Conference presentation to the *Raising Awareness Conference*, St John's, Antigua, October 2009).

Crump-Russell, C. (2009) Taking Boys out of Risk: issues in Antigua and Barbuda (Conference presentation to the *Raising Awareness Conference*, St John's, Antigua, October 2009).

Davies, B (2005) Emerging trends in researching children and youth: a review essay, *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 26: 145-53.

Foot, H. and Howe, C. (1998) The psychoeducational basis of peer-assisted learning, in K. Topping and S. Ehly (eds) *Peer-Assisted Learning,* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Forman, E.A. and Cazden, C.B. (1985) Exploring Vygotskian perspectives in education: The cognitive value of peer interaction, in J.V. Wertsch (ed) *Culture, communication, and cognition: Vygotskian perspectives,* Cambridge University Press, pp.323-347.

George, P. (2009) Another Foray into the Boy-Girl Achievement Debate: A Caribbean Perspective (Conference presentation to the *Raising Awareness Conference*, St John's, Antigua, October 2009).

Oxley, L. and Topping, K. (1990) Peer-tutored cued spelling with seven- to nine-year-olds, *British Educational Research Journal*, 16.1: 63-78.

Rudduck, J. and Flutter, J. (2000) Pupil participation and pupil perspective: 'carving a new order of experience', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30: 75-89.

Topping, K. (1990) Peer tutored paired reading: outcome data for ten projects, in S. Goodlad and B. Hirst (eds) *Explorations in Peer Tutoring,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

Topping, K. (1998) Introduction to peer-assisted learning, in K. Topping and S. Ehly (eds) *Peer-Assisted Learning,* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Topping, K. and Lindsay, G. (1992) Paired reading: a review of the literature, *Research Papers in Education,* 7.3: 199-246.

Topping, K., Miller, D., Thurston, A., McGavock, K. and Conlin, N. (2011) Peer tutoring in reading in Scotland: thinking big, *Literacy* 45.1: 3-9.

Warrington, M. and Younger, M. (2006) *Raising Boys' Achievements in Primary Schools: Towards an holistic approach,* Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Wolfendale, S. (1996) Transitions and continuities in home-school related literature, in S. Wolfendale and K. Topping (eds) *Family Involvement in Literacy: Effective partnerships in Education,* London: Cassell.

Wood, E. (2003) The power of pupil perspectives in evidence-based practice: the case of gender and underachievement, *Research Papers in Education*, 18: 365-83.