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Role play: How teaching make-believe gets real results

Could role-play be the key to helping children understand the world? A school in rural Suffolk, where pupils learn by running imaginary organisations, certainly thinks so. Bill Hicks reports

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Like most of the best places of pilgrimage, Bealings School is difficult to find. It straddles a narrow lane off the high street of Little Bealings, a small village outside Ipswich, well hidden in the gentle folds of the Suffolk landscape.

When you do arrive, the flags, sculpture and children's artwork festooning the Victorian redbrick schoolhouse give some hint of why this small rural primary has become a magnet for educationalists from all over the world.

As you enter the gate – a reinterpretation of Paris Métro art nouveau in twisted and welded steel – you can't help but wonder how many seekers after that elusive curriculum grail have trodden the same path – and whether they outnumber the 98 children who learn here every day.

Bealings School is famous for turning its back on the officially propagated methodology of the past decade, and teaching most of the primary school curriculum through role-play. And doing it so brilliantly that even those twin buttresses of the education establishment – Ofsted and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) – have nothing but good to say of the place.

Attention has focused in particular on the school's adoption of the "Mantle of the Expert" technique developed by the education-through-drama pioneer Dorothy Heathcote. This is certainly central to the school's work, but as head teacher Duncan Bathgate explains, it's not the whole story. He arrived at Bealings 10 years ago, when "it was all subject-based lessons and textbooks."

The transformation took place in stages, as Bathgate and the school's staff (just four full-timers and three part-timers, plus five learning assistants) introduced ideas derived from some of the most radical educators of the 20th century. These included the art-based primary learning pioneer Peter Dixon – as well as an earlier visionary, Teddy O'Neill, head of, arguably, Britain's first real community school in Prestolee, Bolton in the 1920s and 1930s.

There were many others – all advocates of child-centred approaches that went so deeply out of fashion during the Chris Woodhead years. But there's no sense of harking back to some golden age of education – the school has also absorbed what it sees as the best of contemporary practice, forming relationships with schools in Denmark, and Reggio Emilia, Italy, to share and ideas and practice.

Although Bealings is very much in favour now, it wasn't always the case. "You know, someone told me that it was illegal not to teach the literacy hour," says Bathgate. "It's nonsense, of course. We gave it six weeks, then we dropped it. The quality of the writing was just not good enough. But we did feel rather subversive at the time."

The Bealings staff were introduced to Mantle of the Expert in 2002 at a training day run by one of Dorothy Heathcote's disciples, Luke Abbott, then an adviser with Essex LEA. The technique of immersing children in a fictional scenario, casting them in expert roles, and setting challenges, tasks and problems which they can only solve by working together to acquire new skills and knowledge – fitted perfectly with Bathgate's philosophy.

"We use Mantle of the Expert, role-play, when we can't take the children to the real experiences out in the world," he says. Bealings has absorbed the technique and other approaches into its own system, Realistic Experiences for Active Learning – "That's Real – copyright, us!"

The essence of it all is to supply the environments in which children can achieve "depth of engagement" with what they're learning. This could be a trip to Paris to explore art (as happened last year, hence the inspiration for the school gate), or it could be witnessing the emergence of tadpoles in the school pond, or listening and talking to a visiting artist, poet or storyteller.

Role-play, however, allows the school to create a whole world of learning environments. Over the past few years, Bealings children have run a bear sanctuary, an oil rig, a travel agency, a trucking company, a demolition firm, and many other ventures – all within the walls of the school. These imaginary enterprises often have a commercial side, with the teachers acting as clients providing commissions, which have to be costed and documented and carried out by the children.

The genius of this school has been to adopt the role-play technique to deliver large chunks of the national curriculum. Each scenario has to be meticulously planned so that key aspects of literacy, numeracy, science, geography and history emerge at the right time, and are mastered.

This term, for example, Years 3 and 4 have been working together as the management team of a thriving container port – Bealixstowe. It doesn't exist, but to the children, while they're in role, it is as real as the similarly named port a few miles up the A12. They have already covered a great deal of maths – the volumes of containers, the numbers that can be stacked in the terminal – and geography, in the origins and destinations of ships and their cargoes.

But today, their teacher, Kelly King, in the role of a concerned member of the public, presents them with an ethical dilemma – a tip-off that some contraband has arrived from Venezuela. The children have to decide what to do, so they meet, discuss the problem, and act – searching the containers, eventually (after more debate) breaking in to the suspect box and finding fashion items which, according to their labels, are made from the finest Orinoco crocodile skin.

A child is nominated to research the material on Google (tick ICT skills) and their worst fears are confirmed – it's the skin of an endangered species. They meet again and vote on whether to call the police, at which point the teacher says, "Right! Leave the mantle there. But first, help me put the tables back."

While it's hard to convey the intensity of the learning, it's far easier to appreciate the amount of work, and creative thinking, that the teacher has to supply to develop scenarios that can run for a whole term. And then there's assessment. Like everything else here, it appears to happen organically. There's no marking of Mantle of the Expert work. Instead, children receive feedback, from the "client". Assessment takes the form of identifying strengths and weaknesses, and working from these. Bathgate is firm about this: "We always seek to remove the voice of judgement".

If the right learning isn't happening, he says, "we'll have another go, try another scenario. Not everything works first time."

Eventually, it seems, most things do work, at least if you give credence to the national testing. For six of the past seven years, pupils achieved 100 per cent level 4 or higher in Key Stage2 SATs, including the 20 per cent of children with special educational needs. The tests, of course, are compulsory, but not especially welcome: "For the past few years we haven't paid too much attention to them until a couple of weeks before. We're too busy learning and teaching!"

It's little wonder that, following its most recent visit in 2006, Ofsted summed up Bealings as a "remarkable school" in which pupils followed a "wonderful curriculum", taught by "brilliant" staff and led by an "inspirational" and "visionary" head. And nor should it be surprising that the QCA sent a film crew to the school, which it has selected as an exemplar in its quest to define a curriculum for the 21st century.

Interestingly, Bealings has turned itself into a curriculum frontrunner by adapting theories and practices once dismissed as hopelessly old-fashioned. Nor does it display many of the material trappings of your notional "school of the future". Although it makes good use of IT, it isn't particularly evident: "We were warned off buying into computer suites, and we haven't gone for a whiteboard in every classroom," Bathgate says. "Sometimes a blackboard and chalk do the job just as well. Often, a lump of clay is even better. We've gone for a range of equipment – tablet PCs, little cameras, things we can use when we need them."

Similarly, Bealings has resisted buying expensive resources, preferring to make what it needs, collaboratively. "We never use dumbed-down materials."

Its Victorian buildings have been added to, organically. One recent addition is a veranda, opening from a

classroom on to a densely planted sculpture garden. Again, Bealings is already doing what the Government now says all schools should be thinking about: it is listening to its pupils.

Building work was proceeding as we toured the school. The head was mock apologetic: "This is all the children's doing. They decided that they should have 21st-century toilets, so we've knocked down the old block and built these."

Quite a lot of what happens is down to the children: they have a vote at a weekly school meeting. A recent motion, not universally welcomed by the staff, was that teachers could be addressed by their first names. Student voice, anyone?

The school has set up an outreach scheme to support local schools, and its achievements are influencing a wider audience through Bathgate's involvement with, for example, the Schools of the Future programme.

Bathgate, who is now perhaps too much in demand as an adviser and guru for his own liking, has one clear piece of advice – schools work best when they are small enough for everyone to know everyone else. He's an active member of Human Scale Education, which promotes small learning communities, and he sees smaller schools as the way ahead. Small is beautiful, Bathgate believes.

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