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LOOKING FOR LEARNING

Good teaching doesn't always equal a good lesson. Find out how Fairlawn Primary School put learning first...



Learning outside the box: Robin Boshier at Fairlawn Primary school

What is learning? Sounds simple, but ask all your teaching colleagues and you are likely to get a range of answers. That is exactly what Robin Boshier, headteacher of Fairlawn Primary school in Lewisham did with his staff two years ago. 'Most of us misconstrued it as a question about teaching,' he says. 'Until recently the emphasis in schools has been on teaching. It has always been assumed that if there's good teaching, then learning will take place. Now we know that's not the case.'

Ex-Ofsted inspector, Mike Horton, recalls an example from his inspection days. 'The teacher I was inspecting had everything; he was well prepared, had lots of interactive materials, questions and answers, the lot. But when I spoke to the children, they hadn't been challenged at all. Everyone had enjoyed the lesson, but they hadn't learned anything new.'

Becoming learning-focused

It was this realisation that a focus on learning is critical that inspired Robin Boshier to adopt *Looking for Learning*, a new approach for Fairlawn Primary. *Looking for Learning* aims to help schools answer crucial questions, such as 'What is learning?' It lets schools identify, improve and increase the learning that is taking place within their classrooms. 'There's been a complete change in 18 months,' says Robin. 'We've moved from a focus on "Am I teaching well?" to "Are the children learning?"'

So how did Robin and the teachers at Fairlawn make the change? 'We approached it in three ways,' says Robin. 'As an audit about quality teaching and learning, as a lead for looking at key questions for monitoring learning within the classroom, and as an observation process that focuses on whole-school improvement.'

Fundamental to the process was a clear understanding among all the staff of what learning really means. ➤



Identifying learning in the classroom

The next step was to observe and identify the learning that was going on. This included talking to the children about their learning and knowing exactly what questions to ask. 'We had to help our children understand what is meant by learning,' says Robin. 'This has become a constant part of our school life. We have six learning questions that we rotate on a weekly basis. These questions appear all around school, so everywhere the children go they see the same questions. This week's question is "Why are we learning this?" Another question that we use is "How is this connected to our other learning?" It's helping everyone to embed that understanding of learning.'

Robin also says that classroom observations have now shifted in focus, making teachers much more confident. 'The observers clearly know that they are looking for the learning rather than just good teaching,' he says. 'Instead of being praised for having quiet, studious lessons, it's good if there's collaborative learning going on, which is so important for successful learning. The teaching elements are still there, but they're of much less importance.'

Progress

So just how much difference has this process made to the school? 'Six months after introducing *Looking for Learning* we had an Ofsted inspection and learning was regarded as outstanding,' says Robin.



Creating a learning-focused school

The *Looking for Learning Toolkit* provides schools with a whole range of practical ideas for creating a learning-focused school, including turning meetings into learning-focused meetings, writing learning-focused targets, and creating learning-focused displays. Below are some ideas for how to create learning-focused displays.

Use learning-focused language

- Talk about 'learning' displays to each other and to the children.
- Use learning-related language in all of the titles, questions and descriptions that make up the display. For example, *What we have learned about life in Ancient Egypt?*
- Use learning-focused language in individual pieces of learning within the overall display. For example, a caption for a piece of work could be: *Sarah chose this piece of learning for the display because it shows how she is getting better at sequencing important historical events.*

Engage the learners

- Make the displays interactive so that they enhance and move forward your children's learning.
- Add questions or problems to be solved by the children.
- Entice the children using a blank board with a notice 'Watch out for some exciting new learning coming soon to this board!'

- Refer to the displays at the start of the school day.
- Situate a 'teaching' part of the lesson near to a display and use it to help the children focus on the subject.
- At the start of a new project, leave a strange but related object by a blank board and ask the children to write about it (either directly on the board or by using a sticky note). Ask questions for them to answer, such as *What do you think this is? What do you want to learn about it? What do you already know about it?*

Create a 'learning wall'

For either an individual class or a whole-school department, create a display area that resembles a wall – the learning wall. Give each child their own 'brick' in the wall, represented by a coloured piece of paper. At the end of the day, week or topic, ask the children to write or draw what they have learned and to put this on their brick. As the children revisit their bricks over time, the wall will provide them (and others) with a record of their progression. ■

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The observations are just one of five steps in the *Looking for Learning Toolkit*, a self-help toolkit of resources designed to enable schools to become driven by learning. The *Toolkit* includes five manuals guiding schools through the process, with three DVDs and a range of resources. It includes membership to Learning Network and a website for finding out, discussing and learning more about learning. For more information visit www.lookingforlearning.co.uk or call Fieldwork Education at 020 5731 9696.

ChildEd PLUS is offering readers a **ten per cent discount** on the *Looking for Learning Toolkit*. Call 020 5731 9696 and quote 'ChildEd PLUS' to claim your discount! Offer expires 31/05/2009.

