



Getting right to the heart of learning

Pam Harper discusses Fieldwork's Looking for Learning programme

One of the biggest changes happening to schools – and everyone who works in them – is the increasing focus on outcomes. In truth, education and educators have come late to the ball. We have been holding everyone else accountable – doctors, garage mechanics, farmers, you name it – for a long time now. Those of us in education who would just like to be left alone to get on with the job have had a rude shock. The amount of money spent on education and the changing prospects of our children in a global marketplace have put us dead centre in the spotlight.

But what kinds of outcomes matter? It often seems as though we are being judged on our successful completion of *activities*, whether that judgement is about teacher performance or children's work in the classroom when, of course, the real outcome is *learning*. It is the word 'learning' that is at the heart of the issue because it's learning, rather than activity, curriculum or management that makes all the difference to the success of our children.

We need three kinds of evidence to help us assess how well children are learning. Two of these are well known, if not yet fully implemented. The third is still unspoken about yet potentially the most powerful.

First, we need test scores, to see how well children have learned over time. We're doing that moderately well as long as we think only of maths, literacy and science. We're rotten at every other subject. Second, we need assessment that gives feedback to children so that they can improve their own learning. We are still at the foothills of *assessment for learning* in pretty much every subject.

Third, we need evidence that tells us whether children are learning for most of the time that they're in the classroom; that is *learning* rather than *doing*. Being on task is not the same as learning; enjoying the work is not learning. And even if there is learning going on, we then need to know whether it is appropriate and sufficient.

It is probably the most important evidence we need. Why? Because if children aren't learning well enough lesson by lesson then end of year or key stage tests aren't going to tell us much. Conversely, if we were confident that children were learning appropriately and sufficiently lesson by lesson, day by day, we could probably do without end of year tests and rely instead on properly informed teacher judgement.

Just think for a moment: Do you know how much learning is actually going on in your own classroom or in the classrooms of your school? Do you know if that learning is appropriate? Is it sufficient? Do you really know what you and your colleagues are doing to help learning happen? Do you know what you're doing that might be getting in the way of learning? And do you know that your colleagues, your parents and your children share a definition of learning that will lead to continual improvement?

If the answer is no, don't panic; you're not alone! For the past six years Fieldwork Education has been helping schools all over the world answer these crucial questions through our Looking for Learning programme. And not one single school that we've worked with has been able to resolutely answer 'yes' to all of these questions when we have first asked them. Once we have arrived at the answers, then we've used the Looking for Learning process to help these schools work out the best way to make learning really happen, lesson after lesson after lesson.



So how does Looking for Learning work? It begins by making sure that everyone in the school – teachers and children – share a definition of learning. It then utilises seven simple but powerful questions related to learning and gets the entire staff involved in responding to them through observation and hands-on research.

As a team they then create ways to improve each part of the process. It makes everyone look at classrooms in a whole new light, one that is consistently learning-centred. It's caused one teacher to call the process 'transformational' and an elementary principal to describe the insights it gave him as an 'epiphany'.

Through the Looking for Learning process a school develops a common language for learning so that everyone, including the children and students, understand exactly what they are talking about. It also facilitates professional collaboration so that the staff takes on a team approach to learning rather than an individual teacher approach. And it guides the staff towards positive observation of their peers in order to create an empowering and supportive learning-focused community.

The British School of Chicago (BSC) is one of the schools that has used Looking for Learning to become a learning-focused



school as Headmaster Mike Horton explains: "We first of all discussed with all staff (teachers, learning assistants and office and maintenance staff) what their definition of learning was. Then in key stages they pooled their ideas and they came up with a key stage definition of learning. This was shared between all key stages and the office staff and then resulted in an agreement on a school definition for learning which was displayed around the school."

"Next we asked the children in each class to come up with a definition of learning that they understood and this was displayed in their classroom (the definitions in each classroom didn't have to be the same). Then we began introducing learning reviews for parents. As a school, we'd already been sending home at the end of each week a review for each class on what the children had covered. So we changed this to a review of *What your Child has Learned*. We also introduced learning walls into each class."

A learning wall is one of the tools Fieldwork recommends for showing clear, easy-to-understand evidence to a child of how his or her learning is improving. With a learning wall a child who has just learned to count to ten, for example, can build a brick on their wall. It's a display that clearly demonstrates learning-focused results and involves every single child within the class.

Mike admits that his staff was initially hesitant of the value of the learning walls: "At first they did think that these would be a waste of time. So I said that we'd do them for a month and then if they thought they were a waste of time we would take them down. At the end of the month every teacher wanted to keep them and the secondary staff openly said how surprised they'd been at their own and the children's reactions about wanting to keep them!"

Once there was a clear understanding by Mike's staff and the children of what learning meant, we then helped them to introduce collaborative visits to their classrooms. The purpose of these is not to judge or question the skill of the teacher. It is simply to look at the amount of actual learning that's going on in the classroom and how and why that is happening.

We have learned that you can't do that by simply observing classrooms, you have to get amongst the students and talk with them. The skill is in asking the right questions. We are continual-

ly refining our questions so that they are appropriate for different ages of children.

The current list includes questions such as 'Is this new learning?' 'Is this something you've done before?' 'Is it easy learning?' 'Can you show me what you're learning?' and 'How much of your brain are you using at this moment?' Children are very honest when asked these questions and once they understand the language of learning it is very easy for them to express themselves clearly.

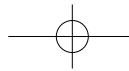
Mike explains how this stage of Looking for Learning progressed at BSC: "We changed our classroom observations to learning reviews and devised a form to record how we were looking for learning which we discussed with all staff. We also invited Fieldwork to do a week's Looking for Learning training for the team who were carrying out all of the classroom visits."

In the classrooms themselves, staff talked about what the children were going to learn at the beginning of the lesson and then during the plenary the children were asked what they had learned. We also brought in a traffic light system at the end of the lesson for the children to assess what they felt they had learned."

When it came to developing the language of learning, BSC were very active in getting the parents involved, as Mike explains: "We held parents meetings to talk about learning and to get the parents to stop asking their children what they had done and instead to ask them what they had learned. We changed everything to learning and wrote about it whenever we could in our school newsletter. We introduced learning-focused displays and learning-focused parent consultation evenings."

"Our purpose," sums up Mike, "was to try and turn our whole school community into a learning community and it has done; it's turned our school into a learning-focused school."

The British School of Chicago is just one example of how Fieldwork Education has worked with the Looking for Learning programme the hard-core way: that is we've gone into the school, rolled up our sleeves and worked with the leaders, the teachers and the children. We're going to carry on doing that with some schools but it is time intensive. It's not cheap for the schools either, which is why we are launching the new Looking for Learning Toolkit; giving schools all the tools to do it, step-by-step, on their own.



The new Looking for Learning Toolkit is a five-volume resource with accompanying DVDs and online support. The website will enable schools to record their Looking for Learning process, to monitor their cumulative Looking for Learning observations, to provide schools with a forum for communicating with other Looking for Learning schools around the world, and to give schools access to the most up-to-date information and insights about learning.

Looking for Learning is transformation. It alters the way your school community thinks and behaves. And Looking for Learning actually increases the learning in your school; improving the amount of learning that happens in each lesson, every day. The new Looking for Learning Toolkit will, we hope, create opportunities for every school, however big or small, to achieve this and become a purpose-driven, learning-focused environment with learning happening every day, hour by hour.

Pam Harper is Director, Looking for Learning programme.

Fieldwork Education's services and products include Looking for Learning; the International Primary Curriculum; On Course for Learning; Learning Focused Reviews; and the International Leadership and Management Programme. For more information about Looking for Learning visit www.lookingforlearning.co.uk or call Fieldwork Education in London at +44(0)20-7531-9696.

